

Language, Power, and Pedagogy: Rethinking Inclusion in Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper investigates the politics of pedagogy in higher education, with a specific focus on inclusive education and the role of language as both a tool and a site of struggle. Set within the sociology classrooms of public and private Indian universities, the study draws upon feminist and critical pedagogical frameworks, foregrounding language politics as integral to questions of inclusion, marginality, and epistemic justice in the Indian context. In a multilingual and multicultural society like India, language is central not only to instruction, but also to representation, identity formation, and access to knowledge. The paper foregrounds the interconnection between pedagogy, language, and social justice by engaging with the possibilities introduced by the National Education Policy (NEP, 2020), especially its emphasis on mother tongue instruction and multilingual education, while offering a grounded critique of how these ideals translate (or fail to translate) within everyday classroom practices. It highlights the urgent need for reflexive, culturally responsive, and intersectional pedagogical models that foreground language as central to the democratization of education. Through a qualitative methodology, the research analyzes semi-structured interviews with eight sociology educators from public and private universities in India, offering insights into how they navigate institutional, cultural, and political constraints while attempting to create equitable learning environments. Public university educators, often shaped by their own histories as first-generation learners or members of marginalized communities, exhibit a deeply reflective commitment to inclusive pedagogy. Their strategies include multilingual engagement, peer learning, and assignments grounded in students' lived experiences. In contrast, private university educators face unique challenges under neoliberal structures that commodify education; yet, many

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attempt to foster critical engagement through creative assignments and discourse-sensitive practices. The findings highlight that language is not merely a vehicle of communication, but a site where power is enacted and contested. Educators' choices around terminology, narrative inclusion, and representational ethics directly influence whether classrooms function as spaces of exclusion or transformation. The paper argues that inclusive pedagogy must be conceived as a linguistic and cultural praxis that is deeply intertwined with issues of caste, class, gender, and region. This paper contributes to existing scholarship by explicitly linking inclusive pedagogy with the politics of language in Indian higher education—an area that remains underexplored despite its centrality to questions of equity and justice. It emphasizes the urgent need to train educators in using inclusive language and to redesign institutional frameworks to support the linguistic and cultural plurality of learners. In doing so, the paper responds to global calls for inclusive and equitable education and contributes to building pedagogical strategies that nurture critical thinking, empathy, and democratic participation.

Keywords

inclusive pedagogy, language and power, critical pedagogy, higher education in India, feminist pedagogy

The Classroom as a Site of Struggle and Transformation

Education has, time and again, been considered the foundation of a healthy democracy. It allows for the possibility of creating equality, helps foster a spirit of critical thinking, and enables spaces for citizens to be involved in social transformation. However, education also bears serious histories of legacy and dominant social hierarchies. Educational spaces, including schools and universities, enact systems of exclusion, despite the fact that they have the potential to undermine the same structures. According to Paulo Freire (1970), education is a non-neutral domain: it reinforces domination or it is a force of resistance. Similarly, bell hooks (1994) points out that classrooms have the potential to enable oppression or be sites of freedom, possessing the possibility of transformation. This dichotomy is especially prominent in the Indian context, wherein higher education is inextricably linked to elements of caste, class, gender, region, and language.

Universities in India are not simply centers for the transmission of knowledge; they are microcosms of the larger society and its conflicts and inequalities. Classrooms are sites for the negotiation of matters of power, legitimacy, and identity. Forms of private and public universities differ to a notable extent, but both embody

tensions over what education is for, whom it serves, and whose knowledge counts. It is within these contradictions that the politics of pedagogy becomes visible.

This paper discusses pedagogy within Indian higher education, focusing on inclusive education and language politics in particular. In a multilingual country like India, language mediates access to information, inscribes identity, and creates borders of inclusivity and exclusivity. English continues to be privileged as the dominant language in academia—it is tied to modernity, cosmopolitan mobility, and elite credibility. English-speaking competence conveys legitimacy within classrooms, while students from vernacular mediums are excluded. This hierarchy is not simply a matter of communicative efficacy; it is also a matter of power: whose voices are amplified, whose epistemologies matter, and whose knowledge is recognized as legitimate.

The relationship between language politics and social justice inevitably becomes entangled. Language impinges on sites of participation, identity, and representation. Educators witness this process in everyday practice. Some educators challenge these inherent linguistic hierarchies by facilitating assignments in local languages, recognizing vernacular expressions, or adopting translation practices. Others, however, are forced to confront institutional contexts in which English predominates and multilingual practices are not always an asset. The findings of this study indicate that language functions not as a neutral medium, but rather as a contested site of inclusion, exclusion, and negotiation.

The interplay between language and the politics of affect is significant. Learning transcends mere intellectual engagement; it is profoundly intertwined with emotional experiences. Classrooms are imbued with sentiments of vulnerability, discomfort, care, and resistance. Educators striving to foster inclusive environments directly encounter these dynamics. They often face hostility when addressing issues related to caste or gender, encounter accusations of “being too political” for naming instances of inequality, and experience pushback from dominant-caste students when discussing privilege. Similarly, they are entrusted with cultivating trust, affirming the voices of students from marginalized backgrounds, and offering emotional support to students grappling with trauma or feelings of alienation. This emotional labor, despite being seldom recognized in institutional assessments, is vital for the democratization of classrooms.

In India, sociology classrooms are an important site for the examination of these processes. Sociology as a discipline engages with questions of inequality,

marginalization, and power relations. In Indian universities, sociology classrooms bring together students from a diverse range of caste, class, gender, region, and linguistic backgrounds. These academic spaces also represent existing epistemic hierarchies. Euro-American sources dominate the curriculum, and often Dalit-Bahujan perspectives are marginalized, while vernacular scholarship is undervalued (if not completely absent in many courses). In this context, pedagogy becomes more than a question of teaching strategies; it becomes an ethical and political project.

By positioning educators' voices at its core, this study contributes to several areas of scholarly debate. It contributes to worldwide inclusive pedagogy discussions by incorporating caste, language, and affect as its focal points—the latter of which is often neglected in Euro-American scholarship. It also contributes to Indian higher education research by providing empirically derived accounts of classroom practice rather than just conforming to policy-driven approaches. It profoundly engages with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and its emphasis on mother tongue pedagogy and multilingual pedagogy. Whereas the NEP's vision aligns with the call for linguistic inclusivity, its attainability faces major obstacles in the form of institutional opposition, the persistence of English dominance, and neoliberal alterations hindering democratization. This paper argues that inclusive pedagogy in India must be reconceptualized as a linguistic and cultural praxis. It is not merely a list of classroom strategies; it is a political and moral stance that intervenes directly within language, caste, class, and gender hierarchies. It must engage with affective labor, recognize marginalized epistemologies, and confront institutional depoliticization. The sociology classroom, a site where inequality is both studied and often reproduced, is a strategic site for this. The subsequent sections are outlined as follows: 1) The literature review examines existing works on inclusive pedagogy, language and power, feminist and critical pedagogy, and identifies conceptual resources and gaps; 2) The findings section reports on the insights of educators from private and public universities; 3) The analysis contextualizes the practices within the larger discussions on language, power, neoliberalism, and epistemic justice; 4) A further section engages critically with provisions on multilingual education from the NEP 2020; 5) The conclusion specifies the future research scope elaborately and integrates arguments, focusing on the imperative to envision inclusive pedagogy as a linguistic, cultural, and affective praxis for democratizing higher education in India.

Research Questions and Research Objectives

This research investigates language as a site of symbolic power in Indian sociology classrooms, evaluating how linguistic hierarchies delineate student legitimacy, participation, and belonging. Through a comparative analysis, it examines the phenomenological experiences and affective labor of educators in public and private institutions as they navigate divergent institutional constraints to enact intersectional feminist pedagogy. Finally, the study assesses the efficacy of pedagogical interventions in disrupting intersectional exclusions—namely caste, gender, and language—to reconceptualize inclusive pedagogy as a situated linguistic and political praxis essential for transformative learning.

To assess the aforementioned objectives, this study attempts to answer the following questions: How do systemic power and language dominance shape the democratic potential of inclusive teaching in Indian sociology classrooms? How do educators in both public and private universities navigate neoliberalism, emotional labor, and language barriers to implement feminist approaches? Finally, what specific combination of epistemic justice and institutional support is needed for inclusive pedagogy to serve as a meaningful political and linguistic praxis?

Theoretical Framework

This study explores the methodologies utilized by sociology educators in both public and private universities in implementing inclusive pedagogy with language and affect. It is anchored in three interconnected theoretical frameworks. Feminist pedagogy approaches learning as relational and transformational, challenging dominant vertical modes of teaching, embracing experience-based knowledge, and viewing affect as an essential element of learning (hooks, 1994; Shrewsbury, 1987). In the Indian context, Sharmila Rege (1995) emphasizes the need for a caste-sensitive feminist pedagogy, arguing that imported Euro-American models should be localized to be meaningful in local circumstances. Critical pedagogy, developed by Freire (1970/2000) and expanded upon by Giroux (2011), considers schooling a site for liberation through dialogue, praxis, and critical insights. In India, it aligns with B. R. Ambedkar's (1936/2014) understanding of education as a pathway to liberation from caste oppression. The concept of intersectionality, posited by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), highlights how different identities such as caste, class, gender, language, and region intersect to produce complex processes of privilege and marginalization. Together, the above-mentioned three approaches provide the necessary

theoretical lens to examine inclusive pedagogy as a negotiation of power, knowledge, and a sense of belonging.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative approach within feminist methodology. It conducted eight semi-structured in-depth interviews with sociology educators in Pune, Maharashtra. The respondents for the study were chosen to ensure a diverse and inclusive sample, representing both public and private universities, varying levels of teaching experience, and gender diversity among educators. Accordingly, the sample comprised four educators (two male and two female) from two public universities and four educators (two male and two female) from three private universities. Pune is a richly endowed site, as it is home not only to historic public universities, but also to elite private institutions. The study was conducted across two public universities and two private universities in and around Pune, Maharashtra. By comparing institutional types, the study illustrates how pedagogy is informed by structural variations, accessibility of resources, and institutional practices. Participants were selected purposively for their experience in teaching diverse classrooms and for their willingness to examine pedagogy. Participants came from different caste and class backgrounds. Several public university educators were first-generation learners or belonged to subordinated castes, whereas private university educators, despite coming from mixed educational and caste-class backgrounds, often had to operate within institutional constraints.

These interviews were primarily conducted in English but allowed for Hindi and Marathi when preferred by participants. Interviews lasted 60 to 90 minutes, and participants agreed to be recorded and have transcripts prepared. Thematic analysis was used to inductively code the transcripts, with feminist and critical pedagogy sensitizing concepts guiding this process. Reflexivity was a central element in the design of the project. As a female researcher, I was aware of how positionality influenced the interviews, enabling me to build rapport in some contexts while feeling humbled in others. Informed consent, anonymization, and discretion regarding sensitive issues such as caste discrimination or institutional politics were key components of the ethical measures.

Literature Review

Inclusive Pedagogy

Inclusive pedagogy has been widely theorized as both a practical framework and a moral stance. Crawley, Lewis, and Mayberry (2008) describe it as reflective, action-oriented, and responsive to learners' lived experiences. Hoffmann and Stake (1998) illustrate how inclusive pedagogy validates multiple knowledge systems and enhances critical thinking abilities. Here, inclusivity means more than accommodating diversity; it involves reorienting the classroom as a participatory and democratic space.

In the context of India, connotations of inclusion hold specific significance. Major inequalities stemming from caste, class, gender, region, and language explicitly affect educational potential long before students enter higher education. Research conducted by Kain (2022) and Sadovnik et al. (2018) illustrates how inequality in systems permeates curricula, evaluative practices, and educators' expectations. The neglect of curricula sensitive to caste and the dominance of middle-class cultural norms continue to reinforce exclusionary practices. Thus, in India, inclusive education needs to be framed not merely in conceptual terms of diversity, but as an acknowledgment of marginality as a fundamental condition.

This perspective necessitates affective attention. Inclusive pedagogy encompasses not just intellectual interaction, but also emotional labor. Educators must create an environment in which students feel comfortable bringing forth their experiences, processing distress, and cultivating critical consciousness. As highlighted in this study, this emotional labor is particularly intense in Indian classroom situations, where the exploration of caste or gender inevitably provokes resistance from students who come from privileged backgrounds. Studies on inclusive pedagogy acknowledge the significance of affect (Crawley et al., 2008), but this Indian example suggests an inseparable connection between affect and social hierarchies.

Language and Power

Language is an indispensable, though frequently underappreciated, instrument of inclusive education. Theorists like Pierre Bourdieu (1991) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) emphasize that language should not be seen as a neutral medium, but as a site of symbolic power. It encompasses histories of imperialism, dictates access to cultural capital, and disrupts hierarchies of legitimacy. In the Indian context,

English has historically been a language of privilege. Its dominance persists in the realm of post-secondary scholarship, as it establishes criteria for who is considered articulate, competent, and intellectually worthy of recognition.

Sadovnik et al.'s (2018) research highlights the connection between linguistic capital, class, and scholarship. Students from vernacular-medium institutions often feel ostracized in English-centric environments, even though they bring valuable perspectives based on their life experiences. This research demonstrates how educators at public institutions subvert this dominant discourse by implementing strategies such as writing assignments in local languages or supporting collective translation efforts. These practices affirm students' linguistic identities while simultaneously challenging and subverting the hierarchies rooted in colonial legacies within the educational system.

Language politics is intertwined with the politics of affect. Linguistic exclusion often evokes shame, silence, and withdrawal among students. In contrast, recognition of vernacular languages generates validation and a sense of belonging. Language, therefore, becomes not just a cognitive resource, but also an affective one, shaping the terms of participation. The NEP 2020, discussed in detail in the later sections of this paper, addresses these concerns by promoting mother tongue education and multilingual education. However, the policy often remains ambiguous about how such ideals can be implemented in universities where English continues to be the dominant marker of employability and status.

Feminist Pedagogy

Feminist pedagogy provides an analytical framework for rethinking inclusion. It contests dominant relations in the classroom, celebrates marginalized knowledges, and views knowledge production as a collective process (hooks, 1994). Additionally, it recognizes that education is inherently political, with classrooms both reproducing and modifying power relations.

Hoffmann and Stake (1998) emphasize that feminist pedagogy values relationality, dialogue, and student experience as core to learning. Crawley et al. (2008) identify reflexivity, affect, and responsiveness as its essential characteristics. In Indian contexts, feminist pedagogy must also address caste, communalism, and neoliberalism. Researchers such as Paik (2021) and Guru (1995) argue that Indian feminist pedagogy cannot be limited to gender; it must also encompass caste and regional hierarchies as fundamental axes of exclusion.

Public university educators often based their practice on personal experiences of being marginalized, whether as first-generation learners or members of marginalized caste communities, to implement feminist pedagogy. They validated experiential knowledge, encouraged critical observations of social hierarchies, and created interactive spaces for learning. In contrast, educators in private institutions also adhered to feminist ideology; nevertheless, they were often faced with administrative pressures to suppress contentious discussions. These instances highlight the dual labor required by feminist pedagogy in India: nurturing of inclusion as well as combating suppressive institutions.

Indian Higher Education

Literature on Indian higher education has consistently highlighted its dual role in promoting mobility while simultaneously entrenching inequality. According to major studies, there has been an expansion of access to higher education, but this primarily benefits the upper-caste, urban, and English-speaking elites. While affirmative action policies have helped include students from marginalized groups, prevailing campus cultures often show intolerance toward their inclusion. Caste-based discrimination, regional biases, and gendered expectations still manifest in both subtle and overt ways.

Public universities have long been places of comparative accessibility, particularly for first-generation students. However, they face challenges due to persistent underfunding, overcrowding, and administrative inefficiency. Private universities, on the other hand, offer superior infrastructure and smaller class sizes but are driven by neoliberal principles that treat education as a commodity (Nambissan & Ball, 2010). They prioritize students from more advantageous backgrounds, and diversity often amounts to little more than token scholarship programs.

This institutional gap underlies pedagogical practices. Educators in public universities innovate multilingual strategies and community engagement despite limited resources. Educators in private universities experiment with innovative assignments and participatory methods but face pressures to deliver “student satisfaction” within a consumer-oriented culture. The two contexts highlight the challenges between ideals of inclusion and the practicalities of institutions.

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy becomes the integrated framework for understanding these dynamics. Freire (1970/2000) defines education as an act of liberation, where students

actively participate in knowledge production rather than being passive recipients. Giroux (2011) further emphasizes the importance of pedagogy in resisting dominant ideologies and facilitating democratic participation.

Critical pedagogical ideologies resonate in Indian educators' practices. Public university educators consciously and intentionally position pedagogy as a form of resistance to caste, class, and gender hierarchies. While private educators operate solely under neoliberal rationalities, there are still attempts to foster critical thinking through creative assignments and dialogue practices.

However, it is imperative to recontextualize critical pedagogy within the Indian setting to reflect local realities. The presence of caste systems, linguistic hierarchies, and the commercialization of education necessitates a re-evaluation of the term "critical" within this particular context. As this research underscores, inclusive pedagogy in India transcends mere acknowledgment; it encompasses the vital aspect of survival, fostering environments where marginalized students can articulate their voices without trepidation and enabling educators to maintain critical methodologies in the face of institutional opposition.

Synthesis

Scholarship reveals that inclusive pedagogy is an urgent and contentious project. World scholarship teaches us valuable lessons in reflexivity, dialogue, and affect. Indian higher education, however, presents unique challenges: hardened caste hierarchies, English dominance, neoliberal imperatives, and emotional labor. These contexts necessitate understanding pedagogy as situated within linguistic, cultural, and political practices. This study also builds on and extends previous discussions by examining educators' perspectives in Indian universities. It argues that in India, there must be an emphasis on language politics and emotional labor as essential elements in the pursuit of educational democratization. It also illustrates the need for a focus on institutional arrangements, tracing how public and private universities develop distinctive yet related spheres of possibility and constraint.

Divergent Contexts: Public and Private Universities

The stories of public and private university educators reveal starkly different contexts in which inclusive pedagogy is imagined and practiced. Regardless of the differences discussed further, educators at both types of institutions share deep commitments to inclusive pedagogy and express a common conviction that classrooms should

become sites where knowledge is democratized, student experiences are validated, and social inequalities are critically examined. However, the paths toward achieving these objectives vary greatly based on institutional resources, student populations, and administrative cultures.

Public Universities: Inclusion Rooted in Struggles for Justice

For public university educators, inclusive pedagogy is fundamentally inscribed in their own educational paths. Many of them discussed being first-generation college students from rural or non-metropolitan regions, navigating linguistic hierarchies and caste exclusions. These experiences serve as a constant reminder of the exclusions that students still face. One educator described how, as a student who once struggled with English and felt inadequate, they now intentionally create space for students to speak in the language in which they feel comfortable. Reflexivity here is not merely an intellectual exercise, but a gut check of lived injustice. This embodied reflexivity influences classroom practices in ways that respond to, yet also build upon, global models of feminist pedagogy.

Language became the focal point of inclusive pedagogy in public universities. Educators acknowledged that English fluency acts as a gatekeeping force, granting power and legitimacy to certain students while silencing others. In response, they intentionally facilitated the use of Marathi, Hindi, and other local languages in classroom discussions, group work, and even assignments. Some allowed reflective assignments to be initially written in the student's preferred language and then translated collectively into academic English. This approach not only affirms vernacular epistemologies, but also challenges the dominance of English as the sole language of valid knowledge. Such practices represent a form of linguistic justice that enables students from diverse backgrounds to feel more engaged in the classroom.

Educational approaches in public universities were based on linking knowledge to everyday experiences. Educators created assignments on caste dynamics in students' villages of residence, implemented gendered household labor surveys based on Arlie Hochschild's *Second Shift*, promoted peer-led classes in which marginalized students could lead the discussion, and utilized anonymized case studies to facilitate sensitive conversations around caste and gender. These techniques prioritized participatory learning, experiential learning, and critical reflection. Notably, they also acknowledged the emotional toll of challenging inequality, allowing space for care as well as critique.

Despite their commitment to inclusivity, public university educators face significant institutional limitations. Large classes, infrastructural shortages, and bureaucratic resistance obstruct experimentation. More importantly, educators encounter hostility when challenging caste or communalism. Students from powerful groups have accused them of “spreading casteism” or “being too political”. Such resistance is emotionally taxing for educators, who must balance the need to disrupt privilege with the risk of alienating students or provoking institutional backlash. As one educator explained, discussions of caste often trigger defensive responses among privileged students, requiring sustained emotional and intellectual effort. The politics of affect, therefore, come to the forefront: inclusion necessitates not just intellectual approaches, but also resilience, patience, and care in the face of resistance.

Private Universities: Inclusion in a Marketized Setting

Private universities offer a different landscape for inclusive pedagogy. The majority have institutionalized Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policies, workshops, and committees. Educators recognized that these efforts leave room for dialogue on inclusivity; however, opportunities for pedagogical innovation in the form of smaller classes, improved infrastructure, and curricular freedom also present themselves. Educators also pointed out contradictions between institutional practice and rhetoric. For instance, while DEI workshop sessions were prevalent, administrators would dissuade educators from discussing caste or minority issues that might be seen as politically inflammatory. Inclusivity in this context risked becoming commodified, presented as a component of the institution’s brand rather than ingrained as a mission of transformation.

Under these limitations, private university educators still managed to implement innovative practices. Multimodal forms of expression were promoted in assignments, such as podcasts, photo essays, and participatory research. Group projects were strategically organized to combine students across different castes, classes, and regions to avoid homogeneous cliques. Certain educators allowed indigenous expressions or local dialects to be spoken during class discussions to facilitate involvement and minimize the sense of alienation among students educated through vernacular media. The syllabi were enriched by including the writings of Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi, and feminist intellectuals, rather than being limited to Eurocentric or upper-caste canonical thinkers. Additionally, many educators used trauma-sensitive strategies, including issuing trigger warnings and offering alternative assignments

for students who may have found some materials emotionally draining. A professor of sociology described an assignment in which students monitored rural news from specific areas over the course of a semester, creating newsletters that invited critical examination of rural realities and developmental contradictions. These strategies represented an active effort to democratize learning while working within neoliberal institutional limits.

These presented various challenges for private university educators. Both student and institutional expectations were shaped by market rationalities. Well-paying students often viewed themselves as clients and equated critiques of caste, gender, or privilege with personal attacks, sometimes resulting in complaints or low feedback scores. Faculty precarity added another layer of difficulty: short-term appointments and performance evaluations tied to student feedback discouraged pedagogical experimentation. Numerous educators pointed to tokenism in institutional strategies, where diversity was used for advertising purposes without meaningful structural changes. Institutional censorship was another obstacle, as events or discussions on sensitive subjects were delayed, diluted, or blocked in the name of “reputation management”. One educator recalled being required to expel “short-topped” students even while leading a course on gender, highlighting the contradictions between classroom ideals and institutional image management. These contradictions led to dissonance, frustration, and burnout for many.

Similar to their public university counterparts, private university educators undertook significant emotional labor, albeit of a different nature. Their challenges were framed in terms of infrastructural shortcomings and were more focused on navigating neoliberal student satisfaction and institutional branding cultures. Maintaining critical pedagogy in these circumstances required ongoing balancing acts between provocation and accommodation, criticality and prudence. The politics of affect was, therefore, as central to private universities as to public ones, albeit mediated by consumerist aspirations rather than material limitations.

Cross-Cutting Themes

In both institutional settings, several themes also transversally cut across educators’ accounts. Language was consistently revealed as a domain of exclusion and power. Educators in public universities attempted to counteract the supremacy of English by legitimizing local languages, whereas private university educators diminished the elitism of English by facilitating mixed or multimodal communication. In both

settings, language politics directly influenced student engagement, confidence, and access to knowledge.

Educators also noted the persistence of intersectional silences. While gender was frequently addressed institutionally, caste and language differences were less regularly acknowledged, particularly in private universities where caste-blind policies tended to obscure structural privilege. This differential inclusion perpetuated structural inequities, underscoring the need for more comprehensive intersectional strategies.

Meritocracy was another recurring motif. Dominant-group students frequently pushed back against discussions of privilege, clinging to ideologies of merit and individual effort. Educators had to navigate this pushback carefully to prevent critical discussions from falling apart. Such negotiation required not only intellectual ability, but also significant emotional investment.

Emotional labor, as it happens, was at the core of both settings. In public universities, where educators bore the emotional weight of validating marginalized lives in the face of hostility, and in private universities, where they navigated the tension between provoking thought and meeting institutional demands for ease, affect could not be disentangled from pedagogy. Inclusive pedagogy was, therefore, experienced not merely as an intellectual position, but as an emotional practice.

Lastly, the two groups of educators highlighted the contradictions within their institutions. The public universities faced shortages of resources and bureaucratic resistance to change, while the private universities were entrenched in neoliberal consumerism and managerialism. In both cases, institutions tended to sabotage rather than facilitate transformative pedagogy.

Toward a Comparative Understanding

Taken together, the experiences of public and private university educators illustrate that inclusive pedagogy is intertwined with broader political and institutional forces. Public universities emphasized inclusion through experiential reflexivity and linguistic democratization, whereas private universities showed innovation within neoliberal constraints but risked commodifying diversity. Both contexts, however, demonstrate that inclusive pedagogy cannot be reduced to classroom techniques alone; it is embedded in institutional logics, cultural hierarchies, and political economies.

Simultaneously, the determination and creativity of educators highlight the potential for change. In the face of opposition, tokenism, and emotional fatigue, they

created micro-spaces for inclusion, affirming marginalized voices, reshaping hierarchies, and challenging the boundaries of their institutions. Their actions show that even as structural change is greatly needed, individual educators still demonstrate courage, imagination, and resilience in democratizing Indian higher education.

Language, Power, and the Politics of Belonging

One of the salient themes that emerges from this study is the central role of language in shaping the dynamics of exclusion and inclusion in higher education in India. Teaching professionals at public universities repeatedly cited the way English acts as a gatekeeping device that grants individuals speaking the language legitimacy and symbolic capital while destabilizing the status of individuals moving from vernacular-medium school backgrounds to higher education. This finding aligns with Pierre Bourdieu's (1973) reading of language as a form of cultural capital, whereby linguistic competence is not neutral but closely aligned with privilege related to class and caste. Here, language becomes an indicator of membership: proficiency in English often signals elite experiences of education, urban origins, and caste privilege, while hesitation or accents become excuses for derision, repression, or exclusion.

Educators at public universities often challenged such linguistic hegemony through methods that validated local languages, encouraged translations, and crafted tasks based on local epistemologies. Such methods contest the monopoly of English as the only valid medium of academic expression by opposing the so-called "colonial captivity of language" propagated by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. By enabling student participation through Marathi, Hindi, or any other local language, educators created a platform of epistemic diversity and increased access to knowledge. These programs prove that inclusive teaching is not only an approach to education, but also an act of resistance against linguistic imperialism and its accompanying hierarchies of power. In private university colleges, the dynamics of language play out differently. While awareness of the phenomenon of linguistic exclusion exists among educators, the institutional culture, shaped overwhelmingly by a class of elite learners, defies open challenges to the hegemony of the English language. Instead, they have devised subtle strategies of including native terms alongside English usage or permitting multilingualism in selected tasks. These approaches reduce the elitist overtones of English while maintaining its privileged status. Additionally, they shed light on inherent institutional contradictions: on the one hand, private universities proclaim diversity and international competitiveness; on the other hand, they tacitly

maintain English's superior status as a marker of cosmopolitanism (Kumaravadivelu, 2007). This contradiction mirrors larger neoliberal discourses in which inclusion is championed in theory but often delimited by existing hierarchies.

Together, the findings suggest that inclusive education in India must be viewed through the lens of language politics. It goes beyond teaching practices or classroom strategies and involves the politically charged consideration of how language creates and maintains social inequalities. Educational language politics play a significant role in determining who sees themselves as having the right to express their ideas, who will remain silent instead, and which experiences will be recognized as valid knowledge. In response, inclusive education can never be separated from the ongoing struggles for linguistic rights and cultural democracy.

Negotiating Power and Resistance in the Classroom

The classroom, as depicted by educators, does not seem like a site of neutral learning but rather a highly politicized space where hierarchies of caste, class, gender, and language are repeatedly produced, challenged, and negotiated. This is consistent with the view of Paulo Freire (1970/2000) that education is never neutral but reinforces prevailing powers or becomes an instrument of liberation. Public and private university publications present findings on the challenge of negotiating prevailing ideologies while educators seek to create an environment that keeps students active rather than at the periphery.

Campus faculty at public universities reported resistance from majority caste students when discussions of caste oppression took place. The allegation of “spreading casteism” is typical of privileged student frames that perceive critique as personal attacks, diverting focus away from structural oppression. This case parallels dynamics observed by Sara Ahmed (2012) when discussing issues of feminist pedagogy, wherein the identification of oppression gets reimagined as causing division. In such scenarios, educators bear an unequal share of what bell hooks (1994) identifies as the exercise of “teaching to transgress”, which propels the student beyond their limits while also containing hostility, negation, and defensiveness.

Educators at private universities encountered similar forms of resistance, although expressed within consumerist paradigms. Here, students as “clients” often equated discomfort with poor service, leading to grievances or lower evaluations for professors. Thus, critical pedagogy experiences resistance within neoliberal contexts that privilege “customer satisfaction”, making intellectual challenges hazardous for

educators in tenuous positions. The need to work through issues of power occurs not only between professors and students, but also between educators and colleges that are more concerned about brand management than about critical discourse. What is evident amidst diverse contexts is that resistance against inclusive pedagogy is neither haphazard nor incidental but rather systemic. It emerges from institutionally deep-seated systems of privilege that sustain themselves by remaining unquestioned. Pedagogical decisions made by educators, utilizing anonymized case materials, scaffolding progressively harder discussions more often, or constructing debates within abstracted frames, constitute modes of pedagogical negotiation that work toward sustaining critical inquiry while avoiding conflict. They illustrate that inclusive pedagogy requires a commitment of more than kindness; rather, it requires the political maturity of an adult sort, emotional fortitude, and ongoing calibration of classroom dynamics.

Neoliberalism and the Commodification of Inclusion

One particular theme in private universities is the commodification of inclusivity. Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies, workshops, and committees are in place, but faculty members consistently point out that these tend to be more branding exercises rather than transformational commitments. Inclusion is sold to potential students and parents as part of institutional status, but meaningful engagement with systemic inequities—especially caste—is usually pushed aside. This use of diversity illustrates the neoliberal logic of higher education, wherein market rationalities prevail over democratic imperatives.

Scholars like Giroux (2011) have maintained that neoliberalism has made universities corporate in nature, promoting efficiency, consumer happiness, and employability. The lives of private university faculty strongly echo this criticism. Professors explained how discussions on caste, gender, or communalism were censored on the grounds of “reputation management”. Others pointed out how students from marginalized groups were highlighted in advertisements while receiving limited structural support in classrooms. The outcome is what Fraser (1995) calls “recognition without redistribution”: symbolic diversity without underlying structural transformation.

By comparison, public universities are less formally market-oriented but are chronically underfunded, plagued by bureaucratic inefficiency, and subject to state meddling. In these settings, the limitation on inclusive pedagogy is less one

of commodification and more one of infrastructural abandonment and political enmity. However, both environments demonstrate how structural conditions, either neoliberal consumerism or a lack of resources, limit the radical potential of inclusive pedagogy. Educators work within institutions that tend to erode their efforts, necessitating micro-resistance to maintain democratic practices in adversarial settings.

Epistemic Justice and the Struggle over Knowledge

At the core of inclusive pedagogy is the conflict over what constitutes valid knowledge. Both private and public university educators attempted to make curricula more diverse by integrating the works of Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi, feminist, and vernacular thinkers. This action directly challenges the epistemic hegemony of Eurocentric, upper-caste, and male canonical thinkers that continue to influence sociology syllabi in India. By validating students' lived experiences as knowledge—whether through ethnographies of caste in villages, reflections on gendered household labor, or participatory regional newsletters—educators exercised what Fricker (2007) refers to as epistemic justice: the acknowledgment of marginalized groups as legitimate knowers.

However, epistemic justice is precarious. In public universities, rigid syllabi and outdated materials hinder the incorporation of critical content, and inclusivity relies on the initiative of individual faculty members. In private universities, while there is flexibility in curricula, it is often constrained by neoliberal imperatives. Faculty can introduce critical texts, only to have them dismissed as “political” or “unmarketable”. Epistemic justice is, therefore, always incomplete, always mediated by educators' commitments and institutional arrangements.

Focus on language in education also cuts across epistemic justice. Allowing students to write or communicate in regional languages disrupts the exclusivity of English as the sole bearer of knowledge. It acknowledges that epistemologies in Marathi, Hindi, or other vernaculars are not second-rate but on par. These practices decolonize knowledge production by challenging colonial hierarchies that equate English with intellectual supremacy. They also create more just opportunities for students from oppressed groups to engage as producers of knowledge instead of passive consumers.

On this understanding, Indian inclusive pedagogy is an epistemic justice project. It aims to deconstruct epistemic exclusion, authorize different kinds of knowledge, and make authority more democratic in classroom settings. Yet, the research

also shows how little these gains hold up when faced with institutional resistance, neoliberal market rationalities, and vested caste-class interests.

Inclusive Pedagogy as Political and Ethical Praxis

The accumulated wisdom of public and private university educators emphasizes that inclusive pedagogy cannot be framed as a toolbox of methods or classroom strategies; it is an ethical and political praxis. In public universities, this praxis is anchored in histories of marginalization, constitutional imaginings of equality, and the everyday struggles of educators and students. In private universities, it is determined by negotiations in neoliberal consumerist cultures, where inclusion is perpetually under threat of commodification or depoliticization.

In both contexts, inclusive pedagogy calls on educators to be courageous, reflexive, and caring. It asks them to challenge structural injustices, handle resistance, and carry the emotional burden of validating minoritized perspectives. It also asks them to negotiate strategically with institutions that tend to reject or devalue critical pedagogy. The results present inclusive pedagogy not as an addition, but as a constitutive component of the struggle for democracy, justice, and equality in Indian higher education.

By centering language politics, epistemic justice, and the dilemmas of neoliberalism, this study enhances our understanding of inclusive pedagogy as a space where larger social conflicts are enacted each day. Classrooms serve as microcosms of Indian society, where hierarchies are not only reproduced, but also subverted, and where more democratic futures are made possible through the tenacity and creativity of educators.

Interpretive Discussion

Based on the empirical findings, this study seeks to navigate an interpretive framework that bridges observed classroom practices with broader questions of power, institutional structure, and social inequality in higher education. The discussion that follows connects educators' accounts to an analytical understanding of inclusive pedagogy as a situated and contested process rather than a neutral pedagogical ideal.

1. The findings discussed above suggest that inclusive pedagogy is significantly influenced by institutional location. Public universities enable forms of reflexive, justice-oriented teaching rooted in educators' lived experiences of marginalization, while private universities frame inclusion within

market-driven logics that both enable innovation and constrain critique. These contextual pedagogies cannot be separated from institutional histories and governance structures.

2. Language emerges as a key interpretive lens, moving beyond communication to function as a site of power and exclusion. Empirical practices, such as multilingual participation and translation-based assignments (discussed above), reveal attempts to disrupt the dominance of English and challenge its alignment with caste and class privilege. Such strategies point to broader struggles over epistemic legitimacy and students' feelings of belonging.
3. The interpretive analysis also highlights how inclusion is unevenly institutionalized. While gender is more readily addressed, it is always more convenient to talk about women's equal rights than to engage with the intersections of caste, class, and gender, and how language becomes a tool that shapes these issues. Hence, discussions on caste and language remain depoliticized and at the margins, producing forms of symbolic inclusion that leave structural hierarchies largely intact. Resistance from students, often framed through meritocratic or consumerist discourses, reflects these entrenched inequalities rather than individual discomfort alone.
4. Across both public and private universities, emotional labor is central to sustaining inclusive pedagogy. Educators' efforts to navigate resistance, affirm marginalized voices, and balance critique with care suggest that inclusion operates as an ethical and political praxis.

This framework sets the stage for further discussion on the theoretical and practical implications of the New Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which are discussed below. The interpretive analysis implies that meaningful pedagogical transformation necessitates structural change that extends beyond the classroom.

Policy and the NEP 2020: Multilingualism and the Limits of Reform

Firstly, The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has been recognized as a landmark reform due to its robust focus on inclusivity, equity, and multilingual education. It clearly promotes the use of the mother tongue or regional languages as the medium of teaching, especially in early education, and encourages a transition toward multilingual practices in higher education. Ideally, these provisions align with demands to democratize knowledge access and counter English hegemony. By respecting regional languages, the NEP 2020 acknowledges what this research finds to be at the heart of inclusive pedagogy: linguistic justice and epistemic plurality.

However, the translation of this vision into practice remains intensely debated. To begin with, Indian higher education still functions within a deep-seated hierarchy in which English is the reigning medium of instruction, the language of scholarly publication, and the symbolic signifier of elite legitimacy. The present study verifies that educators, especially in public universities in Pune, Maharashtra, are already piloting multilingual pedagogies, fostering Marathi or Hindi assignments, empowering local expressions, and practicing translation techniques. These local initiatives embody both the potential and the viability of multilingual education. However, they also uncover the colossal institutional resistance that the NEP 2020 has not yet overcome. Without curriculum overhaul, teacher training programs, and testing reforms, the mother tongue provisions might remain pedagogical wish lists instead of students' lived experiences.

Secondly, the NEP's articulation of multilingualism at times threatens to flatten out the political tension of language. While the policy prioritizes diversity, it fails to capture the ways in which linguistic hierarchies intersect with caste, class, and regional privilege. As this study points out, knowledge of English is frequently associated with caste and class privilege, while vernacular languages remain largely overshadowed. Simply mandating mother tongue instruction does not dismantle these hierarchies; in fact, if poorly implemented, it risks reproducing them by creating parallel systems where marginalized students are confined to regional language streams with fewer resources, while elites continue to benefit from English-medium dominance.

Thirdly, the NEP 2020 does not address the affective and emotional labor involved in multilingual pedagogy. The educators interviewed emphasized that maintaining inclusive classrooms requires more than just language policy; it necessitates constant negotiation of discomfort, resistance, and trauma. Policy regimes often overlook this aspect of pedagogy, and in its absence, the practice of multilingual education can falter at the implementation level.

Lastly, the NEP's concurrent adoption of neoliberal reforms complicates the agenda for inclusivity. On one hand, it promotes multilingual education; on the other, it encourages privatization, internationalization, and market competitiveness in higher education. These trends risk undermining the very purposes of equity and democratization. The experiences of private universities show how inclusion, in neoliberal times, is frequently reduced to branding over reform. Unless coupled with structural redistribution and protection for academic freedom, the NEP's promises risk being co-opted into tokenistic gestures.

In short, although the NEP 2020 offers a key policy window for reframing pedagogy, it will succeed only if it is seized as something beyond rhetoric. That involves making systemic investments in educator education, curricular change, and institutional responsibility. More significantly, however, it involves a recognition that multilingual and inclusive pedagogy is not merely about language options, but about addressing the deeper hierarchies of caste, class, gender, and power that define Indian education.

Conclusion: Inclusive Pedagogy as Linguistic and Cultural Praxis

The study has explored the politics of pedagogy in Indian higher education through the interwoven perspectives of language, power, and inclusion. Based on interviews with sociology educators across public and private universities in Pune, Maharashtra, the research emphasizes how inclusive pedagogy is enacted, contested, and reimagined in the daily life of the classroom. It also demonstrates that the politics of language is at the center of this project, not just as a medium of learning but as a space where caste, class, and regional hierarchies are reproduced and challenged.

At the center of these findings is a sense that inclusive pedagogy cannot be framed as a series of techniques or methods. Instead, it must be seen as a cultural and political praxis. For educators in public universities, inclusivity is an ethical imperative informed by their own histories of marginalization as first-generation students or members of marginalized caste groups. Their classrooms become sites where students' lived experiences are legitimized, vernacular languages are affirmed, and canonical knowledge is questioned. This vision finds its echoes in the emancipatory tradition of B. R. Ambedkar and responds to the constitutional promise of equality and social justice.

For educators in private universities, inclusivity is discussed within the neoliberal framework of marketized education. Their pedagogical approaches are often creative, utilizing innovative assignments, multimedia pedagogy, and dialogic teaching, but are constrained by institutional imperatives to focus on student satisfaction and job readiness. Their frustrations reveal the contradictions of implementing critical pedagogy in institutions that position students as consumers and classrooms as venues for brand promotion. Though they foster areas of change, they also face limitations that depoliticize inclusion into tokenistic diversity.

The comparative observations of public and private institutions highlight that inclusive pedagogy needs to be situated within wider configurations of power.

Infrastructural limitations, doctrinaire curricula, and ideological intolerance restrict public university educators, as do consumerist paradigms, precarious appointments, and institutional conservatism for their private university colleagues. Nevertheless, within both settings, educators' voices confirm that language, emotion, and reflexivity are essential to the practice of inclusion.

One of the major contributions of this research is that it highlights language as both a means and a site of power. English language proficiency remains a signifier of legitimacy and privilege, while local and regional languages remain stigmatized. Educators who ask students to write their assignments in Marathi, Hindi, or other local languages subvert this hegemony and enunciate epistemic justice. These practices underscore that inclusive pedagogy is not merely a matter of diversifying the curriculum, but also of reshaping the very conditions of participation and belonging in the university space. Language becomes a site of struggle between colonial histories of English supremacy and hopes for a truly plural, democratic higher education system.

As important as the above is the role of affect and emotional labor. Educators interviewed stressed that building inclusivity involves ongoing negotiation and navigation through students' unease, trauma, and resistance. Discussions on caste, gender, or sexuality tend to elicit defensiveness from dominant groups, and educators need to navigate critical provocation with sensitivity. This highlights that inclusive pedagogy is as affective as it is cognitive. It calls for awareness of the emotional aspects of learning, as well as institutional facilitation for educators who carry the responsibility of creating classrooms that are both safe spaces and sites of critical thinking.

The interface with the NEP 2020 reflects both the potential and constraints of policy reform. Its focus on mother-tongue teaching and multilingualism reaffirms the directions already pioneered by academics in public universities. However, without investments in curriculum structures, educator capacity-building, and changes in assessment or grading systems, such policy acts are likely to be rhetorical. Furthermore, the NEP's neoliberal strain, prioritizing privatization and competitiveness, could potentially counteract its agenda for greater inclusivity by pitting efficiency against equity. This paradox underlines the necessity for policy discussions to be anchored in the everyday experiences of classrooms, where educators are already negotiating the tensions between linguistic justice and structural inequality.

The results also resonate with broader discussions within feminist and critical pedagogy. They confirm the centrality of reflexivity, action orientation, and emotion,

but push these concepts further by locating them in the Indian context of caste and language as essential axes of analysis. Furthermore, it illustrates that inclusive pedagogy is not a universal model but needs to be constantly re-conceptualized in response to local hierarchies and institutional locations. This calls for an intersectional response that seriously engages with the interlinkages of caste, class, gender, and region in constituting both access to knowledge and classroom experiences.

In practical terms, this study highlights the need for immediate institutional reforms. Teacher training needs to progress from tokenistic workshops to an in-depth exploration of intersectional pedagogy, linguistic diversity, and reflexive practice. Curricula need to be reworked to incorporate marginalized voices and epistemologies. Assessment systems need to evolve from rote memorization to forms that appreciate critical thinking and diverse expressions. Above all, teaching needs to be institutionally acknowledged and valued equally to research, with appropriate support structures for educators engaged in emotionally and politically challenging work.

At a more general level, the study maintains that inclusive pedagogy can be separated from the democratization of education itself. It is not just about the accommodation of difference, but about challenging the hierarchies along which difference is produced. It means reimagining classrooms as spaces of solidarity, dialogue, and resistance. In India's multilingual and stratified society, this involves addressing the exclusions in language, caste, and class while constructing pedagogies that affirm plurality, dignity, and critical thought.

Future Research Scope

This study enhances discussions on inclusive and feminist pedagogy in Indian sociology courses while also indicating many avenues for future research that can expand and enrich this field.

1. A primary objective is to integrate students' viewpoints, especially from marginalized caste, class, gender, and linguistic backgrounds, to ascertain how inclusive practices are experienced, negotiated, resisted, or internalized, and whether they truly democratize classroom participation or perpetuate subtle hierarchies.
2. Future research should implement longitudinal designs to evaluate the sustainability of inclusive pedagogical changes over time: Do critical engagement and dialogic participation endure across semesters, and can inclusive

classroom cultures persist beyond the influence of a single dedicated educator, or are they reliant on individual effort?

3. This study's geographical limitation to Pune necessitates further research that conducts comparative regional analyses across India's many language and socio-political contexts to investigate how local histories, state politics, and regional caste-gender dynamics influence instructional opportunities.
4. There exists an opportunity to investigate inclusive pedagogy beyond sociology, encompassing fields such as engineering, law, medicine, business, and the sciences, to determine whether disciplinary epistemologies, frequently focused on standardization and "objectivity", create distinct obstacles that necessitate context-specific pedagogical approaches.
5. Considering post-pandemic changes, research must rigorously examine the impact of digital and hybrid learning environments, particularly how online classrooms may either perpetuate or challenge exclusions in access, participation, and engagement amid ongoing digital disparities.
6. A crucial focus pertains to the convergence of neoliberalism and inclusion, especially within private universities, where market-driven principles of employability, consumer satisfaction, and branding may depoliticize or commodify equity initiatives. Subsequent research could investigate alternative institutional frameworks that may more effectively uphold democratic education.
7. The study highlights the pressing necessity to conceptualize emotional labor and educator burnout, examining the gender disparities in affective demands and identifying institutional support structures that can foster resilience.
8. Ultimately, policy and institutional ethnographies are essential for examining how inclusion policies manifest in daily administrative and classroom practices, uncovering the micro-politics that influence whether institutional cultures, accreditation systems, and governance frameworks facilitate or hinder systemic pedagogical transformation.

In conclusion, inclusive pedagogy needs to be imagined as a linguistic and cultural praxis—one that is sensitive to the politics of language, responsive to the affective aspects of learning, and anchored in intersectional analyses of power. It is, ultimately, a social justice project. The educators whose voices bring life to this study remind us that classrooms are not neutral sites but contested grounds where hierarchies are reinscribed and resisted. Their own efforts, however limited, are

acts of care and subversion that preserve the democratic potential of education. For inclusive pedagogy to take root, it must be nurtured by policies and institutions attuned to its political, ethical, and affective investments. Otherwise, higher education in India can only aspire to be a means of mobility at best, and not a site of communal liberation.

Research Ethics Statement

This study was carried out in adherence to existing social science research ethics standards. Participants were offered clear information on the study's purpose and scope, and consent was sought before participation. Interviews were conducted with respect for participants' autonomy, confidentiality, and comfort levels. Pseudonyms were employed to ensure anonymity, and identifying information was excluded from transcripts and analysis. Data was kept confidential on password-protected equipment only accessible to the researcher. The research was informed by a feminist ethics approach that privileged reflexivity, non-hierarchical interviewing, and respect for participants' social locations..

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