

# Education or Exclusion?

The Plight of Indian Students

Edited by Nitheesh Narayanan and Dipsita Dhar



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# Entrenching Caste and Withdrawing State: An Analysis of Modi's Education Policies

V.P. Sanu, Ashique Ali Thuppilikkat

Going over the figures which give us information as to the manner by which we finance education in this presidency, I find that out of the total expenditure which we incur on arts colleges, something like 36 per cent is financed from fees. Out of the expenditure that we incur on high schools, something like 31 per cent is financed from fees. Out of the expenditure that we incur on middle schools, something like 26 per cent is derived from fees. Now, Sir, I submit that this is commercialisation of education. Education is something which ought to be brought within the reach of everyone. The Education Department is not a department which can be treated on the basis of *quid pro quo*. Education ought to be cheapened in all possible ways and to the greatest possible extent. I urge this plea because I feel that we are arriving at a stage when the lower orders of society are just getting into the high schools, middle schools and colleges, and the policy of this department, therefore, ought to be to make higher

education as cheap to the lower classes as it can possibly be made.

Dr B.R Ambedkar, Bombay Legislative Council Debates,  
12 March 1927<sup>1</sup>

Ninety-five years ago, the inextricable linkage between the commercialization of education and its consequence for social justice was highlighted by Dr B.R Ambedkar in the Bombay Legislative Council. He identified the withdrawal of the state from the realms of public education as a barrier to ensuring an equitable entry point for the educational aspirations of marginalized communities. If the right to education is a human right and a constitutional right, affordable education to all segments of the populace is the baseline from which modern societies can start debating educational policies. Almost ten decades after Dr Ambedkar's speech, mainly because of the class rule of the bourgeoisie-landlords led by the big bourgeoisie and the failure of a social revolution for civility and redistribution of resources, India is neither close to abolishing graded caste hierarchies and class inequalities nor achieving the slogan 'education for all'. At worst, after the neoliberal policy consensus that triumphed from the early 1980s amongst India's ruling elite, educational policies have bevelled increasingly towards the logic of commercialization. Narendra Modi's far-right Hindutva regime represents a 'continuity' in the neoliberal policy consensus, but with a strong emphasis on centralization and communalization of education.

#### The Modi Government and the Education Sector

Ever since Narendra Modi's BJP ascended to political power in 2014, the resource decisions on education and the pedagogic practices designed for students have been largely non-conductive

1 B.R. Ambedkar, 'On Grants for Education,' in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches Volume 2*, ed. Hari Narke (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2014), pp. 40-41.

for cultivating social citizenship aimed to deepen democracy or civic virtues. Instead, the policy focus reflects the aspirations of neoliberal capital to access the cheap labour market and institutional relations perpetuating caste-based exclusions. The imperatives of social justice run straight into the class and caste decision-making around resources – how policies and political choices structure power relations in society makes a significant difference to the everyday lives of people. It is crucial to examine both the ‘form’ and ‘substance’ of the Modi government’s education-related budgetary allocations and the objectives of NEP 2020. This will help unveil various exploitative relationships (along the axes of class, caste, and gender) and the marginalization processes that operates beyond the domain of education.

An analysis of the Modi government’s union budget (2014-19 & 2019-present) unfailingly shows a declining trend in educational allocations. In the 2014-15 union budget, the education sector received merely 0.55 per cent of the GDP; it was steadily trimmed down to 0.49 and 0.47 per cent of GDP in the successive two financial years, respectively. By 2019-20, the allocation for education has slumped to 0.44 per cent of the GDP. In the pandemic years, the budgetary allocation for education further witnessed a drastic decline to merely 0.40 per cent of GDP in 2022-23.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, in the 2020-21 union budget, though Rs 99,312 crore was allocated for education, at the revised estimate stage, the allocation was reduced to Rs 85,089 crore, a dip of 14 per cent. The schemes that got cut down drastically (unsurprisingly) include ‘Samagra Shiksha’ - a comprehensive programme for school education and the allocations for student’s financial aid (both programmes witnessed a reduction of 48 per cent from the

2 Subin Dennis, ‘India-Trend of Central Government Expenditure on Education Under Modi,’ *Arthavichaaram* (blog), 7 February 2022. The data is based on the analysis of union budget documents of various years and Economic Survey 2021-22.

original budget estimate).<sup>3</sup> The NMMSS funds saw a 6 per cent drop in allocation from the budget stage to the revised stage. The allocation for the Department of School Education and Literacy was 27.52 per cent less than their proposals, per the 2020 report by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Human Resource Development.<sup>4</sup>

In the period 2017-18 to 2019-20, the difference between the union government's budgeted estimates for the MDM scheme for school children and its actual releases was 11.45 per cent.<sup>5</sup> The Rs 110 crore allocated for the NSIGSE was cut to Rs 1 Crore. The programme received zero fund allocation in the 2022-23 union budget! Similarly, the EMRS for students from tribal communities, though part of the Modi government's political rhetoric, received no allocations in the budget. In recent budgets, the PMSS for SC and ST students, the educational schemes for minorities (and madrasas), and scholarship schemes for differently abled students likewise witnessed a massive slump in allocations. The indication is clear; the union government is withdrawing from social justice commitments, and the schemes for marginalized communities are the most effortless to mow down.

The repeated shortage of budgetary allocation for education needs to be read along with the CAG of India's report for the financial year 2017-18. That report showed that the government had not used Rs 94,036 crores collected as Secondary and Higher Education Cess.<sup>6</sup> Evidently, the Modi government is nowhere near

3 Demand for Grants 2021-22 Analysis: Education, *PRS Legislative Research*, 17 February 2021. [https://prsindia.org/files/budget/budget\\_parliament/2021/DFG%20Analysis%202021-22%20-%20Education.pdf](https://prsindia.org/files/budget/budget_parliament/2021/DFG%20Analysis%202021-22%20-%20Education.pdf)

4 Demand for Grants 2020-21 of the Department of School Education and Literacy, Standing Committee on Human Resource Development, 5 March 2020, p. 10.

5 Demand for Grants 2020-21 of the Department of School Education and Literacy, Standing Committee on Human Resource Development, 5 March 2020, p. 21. [https://rajyasabha.nic.in/rsnew/Committee\\_site/Committee\\_File/ReportFile/16/123/312\\_2020\\_3\\_12.pdf](https://rajyasabha.nic.in/rsnew/Committee_site/Committee_File/ReportFile/16/123/312_2020_3_12.pdf).

6 Nikunj Ohri, 'CAG And The Mystery Of The Unspent, Untransferred Cess,'



fulfilling the recommendation for 6 per cent of GDP to be spent on education, reiterated in most policy documents since the NPE 1968. As Ambedkar feared ten decades ago, the reduced budget allocation is not favourable for providing accessible education for all. It is a thrust for commercializing and privatizing education. Moreover, Modi's NEP 2020 unapologetically reflects the urgency of reorienting the academic structure to suit India's ruling elites' class interests and business needs and entrenching caste-based exclusions from primary education to higher education.<sup>7</sup>

In higher education, the significant reforms are the four-year undergraduate programme with 'multiple exit points, the one-year master's programme, and the undoing of the M.Phil. degree. The 'exit options' in graduate degrees, in fact, provide a conducive institutional arrangement for students at the margins to drop out before completing their degrees. An additional year of the undergraduate degree puts an excess financial burden on socio-economically vulnerable families. It forces the underprivileged students a 'choice' to enter low-paid and low/semi-skilled jobs rather than any assurance for social mobility. Similarly, the undoing of the M.Phil. programme severely affects women and underprivileged students, as there is no such opportunity for developing their research aptitude over a short period. This arrangement is skewed towards the privileged students with socio-cultural capital, who enjoy an extra edge in PhD recruitment. Therefore, the NEP 2020-based reforms in higher education systematically dispossess the marginalized communities from higher learning options; it channels the underprivileged students to become cheap – low and semi-skilled – labourers for the neoliberal market demands rather than allow the creative potential of students to flourish.

The NEP 2020 promises 'increased flexibility and choice' to drop out and learn vocational skills, not just in higher education

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*Bloomberg Quint*, 15 February 2019. <https://www.bloombergquint.com/business/cag-and-the-mystery-of-the-unspent-untransferred-cess>.

7 Dr B.R. Ambedkar, Bombay Legislative Council Debates, 12 March 1927.

but in school systems as well. The document notes:

Every student will take a fun course, during grades 6-8, that gives a survey and hands-on experience of a sampling of important vocational crafts, such as carpentry, electric work, metal work, gardening, pottery making, etc., as decided by States and local communities and as mapped by local skilling needs.

All students will participate in a 10-day bagless period sometime during Grades 6-8 where they intern with local vocational experts such as carpenters, gardeners, potters, artists, etc. Similar internship opportunities to learn vocational subjects may be made available to students throughout grades 6-12, including holiday periods.<sup>8</sup>

In a society marked by graded caste hierarchies, stabilized by the hereditary transmission of family occupations, which section of students can have fun through vocational courses (including on holiday periods)? Which communities hold social power in local communities in most parts of India to decide and allocate resources? With so much 'choice' provided to drop out from education, particularly from higher education, which section of students will climb up to become India's ruling elite and who will continue perishing at the margins?

The extra emphasis on 'vocational education' needs to be read along with the provisions already allowed by Modi Government on the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2016. The amendment permitted child labour in 'family or family enterprises' and added that 'children may work after school hours or during vacations.' It has also trimmed the list of hazardous occupations, exempting battery recycling units, brick kilns, chemical mixing units, cotton farms and many other industries.<sup>9</sup>

8 National Education Policy 2020, Government of India, p. 16.

9 Ruchira Gupta, 'A law that allows child labour,' *The Hindu*, 10 August 2016.

As the Indian experience of child labour is premised mainly on the caste-based division of labour, the dilution of child labour laws and the restructuring of school pedagogy by privileging vocational training and vocational internships are direct indications of:

- a. Entrenching caste-based hereditary family occupations in society; and
- b. Satisfying the cheap-labour requirements of big-business and corporate outsourcing.

Both these policies punish children for their poverty and historical injustices inflicted by feudal classes and ruling castes upon their communities.

The NEP 2020 explicitly implies that Modi is India's new Manu pledged to sustain the Varnashrama social system! If Manu ensured that education is confined only to the ruling classes and castes while prohibiting the labouring classes and castes from learning, Modi had furnished the same objectives by providing 'choices' and formative institutional conditions for marginalized communities to drop out or face systemic exclusions.

Moreover, NEP 2020 provides enormous incentives for private players to flourish in the education sector. Is it a deep secret that the existing schooling system is already stratified along class and caste lines? What do equal opportunity and consideration for private and public schools aim to produce? The logic of 'private philanthropy', complementing the public-funded initiatives, is very disturbing. The consequences of this approach are considerable:

- a. This approach places public and private educational institutes on an equal plane, disregarding the latter's role in perpetuating class divisions and social inequalities in society by developing stratified schooling arrangements.
- b. The state has outsourced its enrolment goals to the private sector.

- c. The state seeks to legitimize the neoliberal metamorphosis of students into 'customers' and educational institutions into 'service providers'. The right to education becomes a right to profit.

The NEP 2020 has also weakened the regulatory commitments of the state. The policy pledges to 'make it easier for both governments as well as non-governmental philanthropic organizations to build schools, to encourage local variations on account of culture, geography, and demographics, and to allow alternative models of education, the requirements for schools will be made less restrictive'. The policy allows highly relaxed requirements for establishing private schools in any part of the country, weakening the state government's or local government's role. Furthermore, it allows the private schools (and private colleges and universities) to self-monitor (e.g. private schools will display information regarding fees and other 'inclusive' provisions on the website) rather than enforcing state regulations and strict monitoring to ensure the implementation of social justice commitments. The 'light but tight' regulatory framework provides a facilitative atmosphere for reactionary forces like Sangh Parivar to poison young minds by extending all-India-wide educational institutions. Here, the Hindutva's linkages between commercialization and privatization (furthering weak state regulatory frameworks for monitoring school systems) are exposed.

After the RTE 2009, weaker and disadvantaged sections were allotted a 25 per cent reserved quota in private schools. Our experience shows that private institutions have demonstrated considerable resistance to implementing social justice norms in the past decade. For example, in Mumbai, both the SFI and DYFI, along with organisations like JMS, had to lead sustained agitations in Andheri and Dharavi areas to ensure the enrolment of marginalized students into private schools. The private schools' 'self-monitoring' or 'public disclosure' cannot guarantee their

compliance with constitutional and state-mandated requirements.

We have also witnessed the attempts to dilute RTE, where the logic of closure of non-economic schools or the merger of small schools is advanced. In Jharkhand, NITI Aayog appointed a private consultancy group that recommended merging over 6,000 schools.<sup>10</sup> Around 4,600 new primary schools opened in the early 2000s to fulfil universal education schemes were merged with the bigger schools in neighbouring localities, mainly during the BJP's ruling tenure. Similar attempts were prevalent in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and many other states. On 7 July 2017, the Modi government released a circular on 'Guidelines for rationalisation of small schools across states for better efficiency'.<sup>11</sup> In the same year, NITI Aayog launched the Sustainable Action for Transforming Human capital programme, along with McKinsey & Company and IPE Global consortium.<sup>12</sup> The NEP 2020 also talks about rationalising schools or school complexes/clusters to get rid of small schools and single-teacher schools.<sup>13</sup> All these initiatives aim to assist the state governments in rationalizing the burden of public education, primarily by merging schools in rural localities. Similar directives are put in place for colleges that enrol below 3000 students. The policy implications are evident: the union government aims to cut off access to education for students belonging to socially marginalized communities and remote rural areas. The priority for maximizing resource usage has come at the cost of displacing students from the margins. The recent experience around 'rationalization' of

10 Abinash Dash Choudhury, 'Primary schools: Merger muddle', *Frontline*, 19 July 2019. <https://frontline.thehindu.com/cover-story/article28259500.ece>

11 F.NO.12-4/2016-EE.11, Government of India, Ministry of Human Resource Development Department of School Education & Literacy, 07 July 2017, [https://www.education.gov.in/en/sites/upload\\_files/mhrd/files/Guidelines%20for%20Rationalization.pdf](https://www.education.gov.in/en/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/Guidelines%20for%20Rationalization.pdf).

12 'SATH program launched by NITI Aayog', *Press Information Bureau*, Government of India, 10 June 2017, <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/printrelease.aspx?relid=165545>.

13 National Education Policy 2020, Government of India, p. 29.

school resources indicates that the policy has caused accelerated dropouts – mainly among women, SCs, and STs – who now find it challenging to travel to far-flung areas for education because of unaffordability, transportation issues, and safety/security issues. Here we can see that the union government's policy is responsible for producing the context for the lack of incentives amongst marginalised communities to access education.

Likewise, the policy of graded funding for schools, colleges, and universities creates institutional hierarchies among educational institutions. The performance-based funding, endorsed in NEP 2020 and already practised through RUSA and HEFA, ensures that institutions affected by infrastructural and resource deficiencies will continue to be deprived of the needed resources. Incentivizing the already well-established institutions (e.g. mostly the beneficiaries are IITs, NITs and a few Central Universities) is not a commitment to mass education, but it creates a 'special class' of achievers, mainly from the privileged communities. Institutions such as the IITs and central universities have featured representational inequalities in the admission process and faculty recruitment, and routinely discriminate in academic spaces against socially marginalized communities, as evidenced from the Indian Researcher's recent study report.<sup>14</sup> An analysis of the 2021-22 budget indicates that grants to central universities and IITs consume around 16 per cent of the education budget (8 per cent each and with graded funding to institutions).<sup>15</sup> The autonomous bodies, including the Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan and Navodaya Vidyalaya Samiti, also take up 12 per cent of the education budget expenditure. Though financing these institutions is required, it shouldn't be at the

14 Research Associates, 'Manufactured Merit, Neoliberalism and Caste Discrimination: Three Evils of Higher Education In India,' *Indian Researcher*, 27 January 2022. <https://indianresearcher.in/manufactured-merit-neoliberalism-and-caste-discrimination-three-evils-of-highereducation-in-india/>

15 'Demand for Grants 2021-22 Analysis : Education,' *PRS Legislative Research*, 2021, <https://prsindia.org/budgets/parliament/demand-for-grants-2021-22-analysis-education>.

cost of neglecting mass education or public schools and colleges (mostly under state governments) where the bulk of students from marginalized communities access education opportunities.

The NEP 2020 has reserved a considerable part of rhetoric for online education. It is portrayed as an intervention to promote 'access, equity, and inclusion,' largely disregarding the fundamental reality of the digital divide in India. During the pandemic, the school survey report 2021 indicated that only 8 per cent of rural students could study online regularly; in urban localities, the figure was 24 per cent, primarily because of inadequate access to digital infrastructure.<sup>16</sup> The NSSO 2017-18 data similarly indicates that only around 8 per cent of students have both computers and home-based internet access in India, with more significant asymmetry towards the students from rural areas. The intense proliferation of online education and MOOC curriculum is part of redesigning the educational infrastructure where few subject 'specialists' or experts are needed to prepare or deliver content. At the same time, the 'facilitators' (with moderate skillsets) could engage with students mainly in the rural margins, cutting down the need for government investment in public education or preparing teachers and required infrastructure. This design has been prominent amongst the neoliberal policy circles since the 1980s; the NEP 2020 has extended its possibilities as a cost-cutting measure, disregarding the existing social inequality in the society or the caste and class implications of such designs.

The critical weakness of Modi's new education framework is not just about maintaining a blind eye towards exclusion, which is structural and shaped by the socio-political process where caste, class, religion, linguistic, and gender identities play significant parts. But also systemically facilitating exclusion by weakening state intervention and policy-level correctives to attend resource deprivations, institutional barriers, and socio-cultural

16 *Locked Out: Emergency Report on School Education, 2021.*

marginalization. The neoliberal phrase – rollback of the state – is antithetical to a meaningful agenda to promote inclusivity and undermine exclusion. It facilitates corporate intrusion into education design to generate pliant workers for a labour market rather than citizens for active democracy.

The NEP 2020 entrenches caste-based hereditary occupational skills for the students from the margins, disables their opportunities for social mobility by depriving state resources and strengthening the privatization and commercialization of education. The Modi government's policies and budgetary allocations embrace the capitalist class's proclivities and socially hegemonic forces by withdrawing from constitutionally mandated social justice commitments, normalising and deepening the existing hierarchies in educational institutions, and creating conditions for cheap labour recruitment from the margins.