

# **TOWARDS ENHANCING SOCIAL EQUITY**

**Inclusion in the National Education  
Policy**

**2021**

# TOWARDS ENHANCING SOCIAL EQUITY-INCLUSION IN THE NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY, 2020

Dr BR Ambedkar placed much value in education, as seen from his clarion call 'Educate, organise, agitate' to the socially excluded and marginalised communities; from his own experience in rising from the rank of the 'untouchable' to becoming a leading intellectual and the chairperson of the drafting committee of the Constitution of India. He set up many educational institutions including the 'People's Education Society' to promote education with special focus on children from the marginalised communities. He was of the firm belief that the state should make all levels of education affordable and without discrimination to all children.

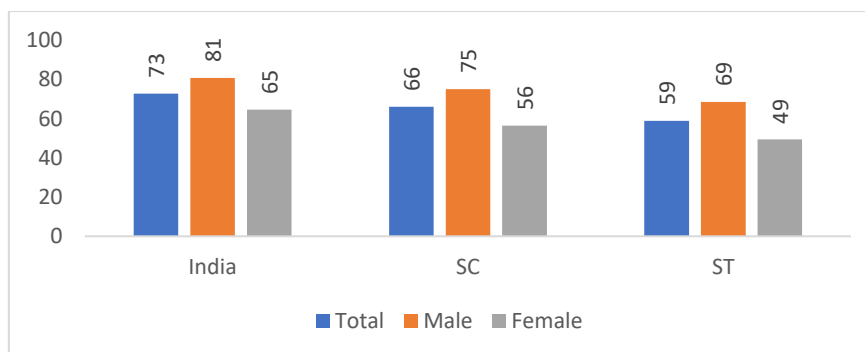
As the principal architect of the Indian Constitution, primary education was crafted initially as a 'right to every child and the state duty bound to provide it within a period of ten years.' Through the debates the same was shifted to the Directive Principles of State Policy under Article 45 of the Constitution – "The state shall endeavour to provide, within a period of 10 years from the commencement of this constitution, for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years". It took another 59 years, before the debate was revised as Article 21 A in 2009; "The state shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of six to fourteen years in such manner as the state may by law determine". The Supreme Court further stated 'the right to life and dignity of an individual cannot be assured unless it is accompanied by the right to education'.

Education is an important goal under the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) with the fourth Goal vowing to 'ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote life-long education' and includes 10 targets and 11 indicators.

Access to and performance in education is significantly dependent upon and impacted by one's social location of caste, ethnicity or religion intersected by related disadvantages of gender, disability, sexual orientation, geographic location, economic status etc. (Govinda,

2002; PROBE Team, 1999; Thorat and Newman, 2009; Nambissan, 2009; Desai and Thorat, 2012). Ramchandran & Naorem, 2013 in a six-state study found that the prestigious responsibilities in educational institutes were often given to the ‘upper caste’ students compared to the ‘lower caste’ students. The literacy rates among scheduled castes and scheduled tribe fall starkly below the national average and women in all categories have lower rates of literacy, as seen below:

**Literacy rate by gender and social groups (Census, 2011)**



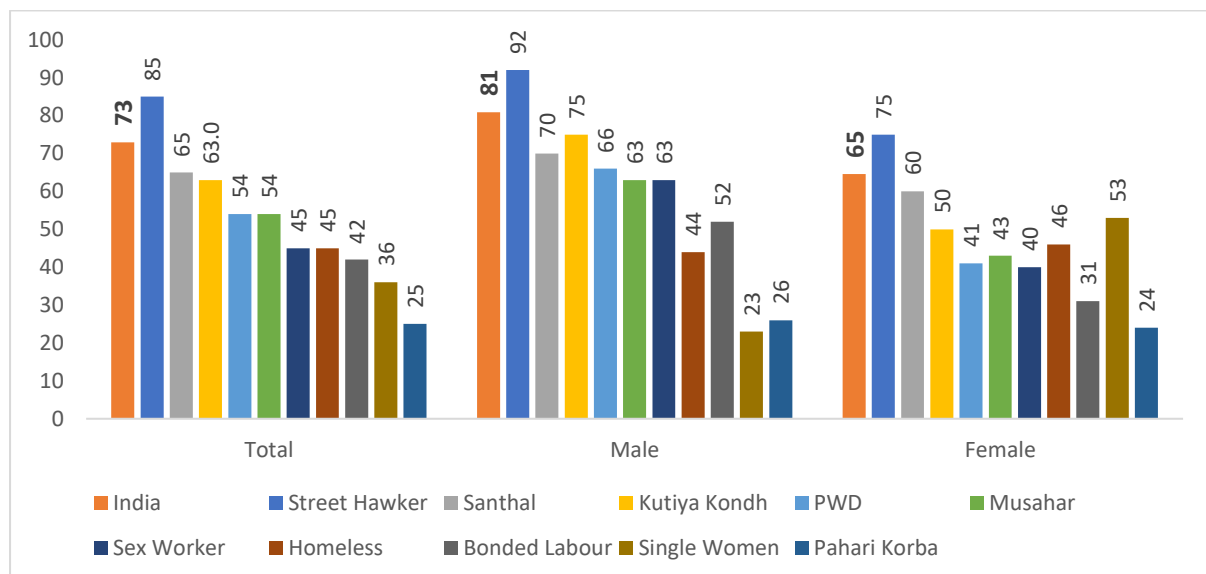
There is limited information on the education differentials across social categories in urban areas to derive any conclusive observations. A 2020 study<sup>1</sup> by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA) reviewed education across ‘poor and non-poor children; across slum and non-slum children and between boy’s and girls’ in urban areas. The study notes that while level of education has improved in urban areas, the deprivation tends to be highly concentrated in specific groups, mainly slum dwellers and street children. In 2014-15, while 12.2 percent children in urban areas did not attend school, it was 19.3 percent among the urban poor. More than half the urban poor children in 16-17 years have not attended any school at any level. The education status and trend of urban poor children was found to be lower than that of the urban children across all major education indicators.

There are several vulnerable population groups in the country whose education data is not captured at the national or state levels. There is no way to adequately understand their status or challenges in education from the national or state data sets. The ‘100 Hotspots: Snapshot

<sup>1</sup> Children and Adolescents in Urban India: Scale and nature of deprivation-An empirical analysis April 2020

of socially excluded and vulnerable population groups in India<sup>2</sup> (100 Hotspots, hence) gathered community driven data on various development indicators of smaller vulnerable population groups in specific locations. As anticipated, the status of education in the communities vary greatly from the national education status and also between the communities as can be seen below in the literacy data for 10 communities gathered in 2019.

### Literacy rates across 10 vulnerable communities by gender



Source: Data from the 100 Hotspot study, 2019

Many marginalised communities, as seen above, have extremely poor literacy rates. The state provision of free/affordable quality public education is critical for the children from these communities to explore their own potential and positively contribute to their communities and the nation. The upcoming education policies should thus invest in creating the necessary infrastructure, mechanism and resources to truly promote universal access to quality, inclusive and affordable education to all children with special focus on the vulnerable sections.

This brief document reviews the key provisions of the National Education Policy 2020 to assess the challenges/mismatch and makes recommendations to improve access and accountability to benefit the marginalised communities – with a primary focus on school

<sup>2</sup> The 100 Hotspots is an initiative of Wada Na Todo Abhiyan to track the development status of vulnerable population groups in specific geographic locations using the SDG framework. Community volunteers gather data from 100 households in their community.

education. Needless to say, that mismatches unaddressed will undermine achieving the objectives set out in the policy as a whole and should be a matter of concern for the whole of society and not only to the marginalised communities.

### The National Education Policy, 2020

After a lengthy process, the Government of India publicly announced the National Education Policy (NEP) in July 2020. Given the spectacular changes in the knowledge and technology, a revised policy was long overdue, the earlier having been done in 1986. The policy also comes at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and is an opportunity to meet the emerging challenges and make quality education truly universal, inclusive and equitable 'leaving no one behind'. Access and equity are two important dimensions while reviewing the policy from the lens of the marginalised communities. In recent times, the two terms are defined while harmonising the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) in relation to the Right of Children to (free and compulsory) Education (RTE) Act in the Framework for Implementation.<sup>3</sup>

*“Equity will mean not only equal opportunity, but also creation of conditions in which the disadvantaged sections of the society --- can avail of the opportunity”.*

*“Access will not be confined to ensuring that a school becomes accessible to all children within a specified distance, but implies an understanding of the educational needs and predicament of the traditionally excluded categories....”*

Chapter III of the Framework for Implementation reviews the context, challenges and state provisions for various categories of children from the marginalised communities. They include i) girls, ii) children from scheduled caste community, iii) children from scheduled tribe communities, iv) children from Muslim community, v) children belonging to most underprivileged groups (a) urban poor, b) child labour, c) children in ecologically deprived geographies, d) children in poor slum communities, e) children of stigmatised communities, f) children of migrant labour, g) children of landless agricultural labour, h) children in nomadic and pastoralist communities, i) children of forest dwellers and remote desert hamlets, j) children in civil strife areas); vi) further excluded children.

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<sup>3</sup> Framework for implementation based on the RTE Act, 2009;  
[https://seshagun.gov.in/sites/default/files/2019-05/SSA-Frame-work\\_0.pdf](https://seshagun.gov.in/sites/default/files/2019-05/SSA-Frame-work_0.pdf)

The NEP envisages considerable changes to the existing education system. Even as the policy includes progressive elements; the access, applicability and impact on the marginalised children need close attention. Educationists, academic and civil society organisations have recognised critical dimensions in the NEP that need to be reviewed so that marginalised children can access and enjoy universal inclusive quality education promised through the NEP.

*Below is brief review of some key dimensions, challenges of marginalised communities and recommendations for inclusion perspectives and provisions:*

### **1. Unequal systems of education should be discontinued under NEP:**

The quality and opportunity chasm *between* private and public education and *within* the private and the public education in India is well documented and experientially reported. The NEP sanctions the continuation of the unequal and differential system between the private and the public education and wide variations within each. It envisages universalising education on one hand through non-governmental philanthropic organisations and on the other through the open school systems. The opportunities and outcomes from the two are vastly different as substituting open schools for children who should be in regular schools is a disservice to them and to national development.

Different schools and systems providing unequal quality of education will promote unequal opportunities, unequal outcomes and an unequal society. Children from marginalised communities will continue to occupy the bottom rungs and not move out of the vicious cycle of poverty, under-development and inequality. In the current framework of unequal education systems, NEP is not poised to achieve its opening statement of ‘promoting education for achieving full human potential, developing an equitable and just society, promoting national development’ without addressing this inequality.

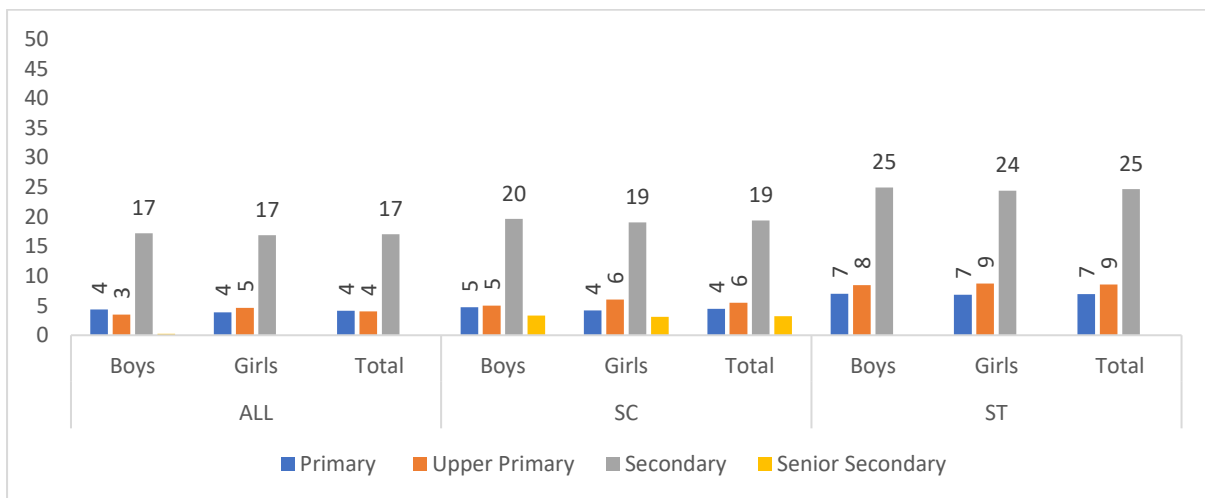
*In order to promote education for an equitable and just society, it is important to ensure that all children access ‘equal quality education’ (not uniform education), regardless of the school or system they are affiliated to. All efforts must be made to ensure that there is equitable quality input at each level of education for all children across different systems of schooling and affiliation. This would require equitable budget resources, well qualified teachers, adequate and relevant teaching learning materials, adequate and safe infrastructure, planned*

sports and co-curricular provisions, exposure and opportunities for exploring and strengthening talents and leadership.

**2. Fill the gaps for marginalised children to access/benefit from the NEP provisions:**

The NEP seeks to promote seamless flexibility across subjects and curriculum, better choices for students, greater opportunities for weaving experiences and knowledge etc. Acknowledging these progressive steps under the NEP, it is although of concern how children from the marginalised communities will access these opportunities. The high dropout rate of children from the marginalised communities reflects that the current education system and equity provisions provided by the state are not adequate to off-set the social, economic and educational disadvantages of these families/communities.

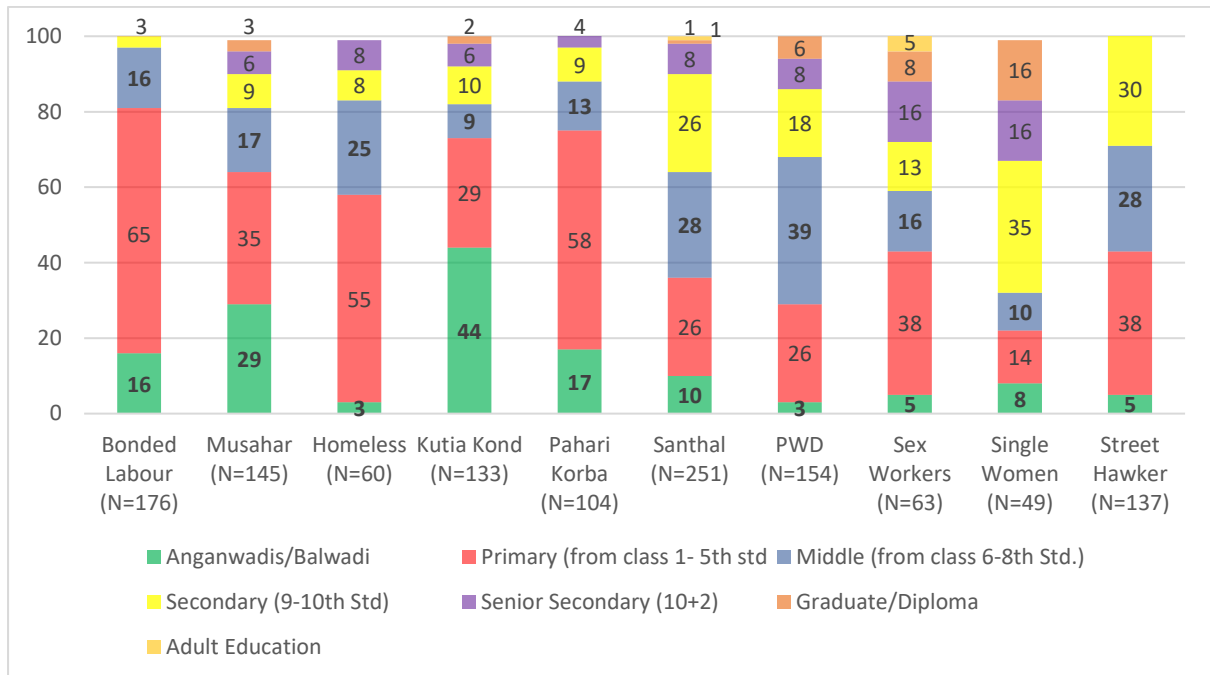
**Average Annual Drop-out Rate (%) in School Education by Gender and Social Groups, 2014-15**



Source- Ministry of Human Resource Development-GOI, 2015, Educational Statistics at a Glance, Dept. of School Education & Literacy, Statistics Division

It is to be noted that there exists no data on the levels of education accessed by small vulnerable population groups at the state or national levels, making it extremely difficult to make necessary policy provisions. The ‘100 Hotspots’ study gathered the levels of education accessed by ten communities showing the poor education levels of the communities and wide variation across the communities too. As seen below, majority of the members access primary or middle school and the possibility of them accessing the provisions in the NEP is negligible.

### Level of education in vulnerable communities (% ever attended)



Source: Data from the 100 Hotspot study, 2019

Given the existing situation, children from the marginalised communities are not in a position to access and benefit from the progressive provisions in the NEP. Today they complete the three-year degree course with great struggle, what additional support is being put in place for them to complete the four-year degree course? What steps will the state take to ensure that poor students who take a break during their course will re-join? How will children who have negligible social capital gain internships and experience?

There looms the danger of more marginalised children dropping out from the school through the examination schedules, inadequate scholarships, inadequate inputs, associated child labour law (that allows children to work in family related enterprises) and being pushed into vocational streams. Rather than benefit, there are more chances in them losing out and backsliding owing to these very provisions. One fears that educational disadvantages and inequalities will continue and widen.



*The policy needs to assess the constraints children from the specific marginalised communities face in accessing different levels of education and put in place measures and mechanisms to expand affordable educational opportunities at all levels to all children. Further, state should make necessary provisions for 'free and compulsorily education available' to all children to complete 15 years of schooling as envisaged under the NEP. No child should be denied this opportunity to build their capabilities to make choices, explore options and opportunities to further educate themselves.*

### **3. Need roadmap for time-bound implementation:**

The NEP has revised the existing education structure/administration into 5+3+3+4 of 15 years, including universal early childcare and higher secondary education. The policy rightly recognises the importance of early childhood education and that 'presently quality early childhood care and education (ECCE) is not available to crores of young children, particularly from socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds.' It seeks to universalise the ECCE, a progressive and essential step to lay the foundation for learning and preparing children for the school-age.

However, the anxiety is about the time that will be taken to implement these changes. Past experiences in the implementation of RTE Act does not build confidence that the structure and system will be put in place within the stipulated time. After 10 years, only 12 percent of schools fulfilled the basic conditions under the RTE Act, which were mandated to be completed within five years.

India is signatory to the SDGs and the policy refers to aligning itself with the SDG 4 of 'equitable quality education with inclusion'. The UN has declared 2020-2030 to be the 'decade of action to deliver the goals.' Will the announcement of the policy be cited as the progress made by India on SDG 4? Will the systems be operational to promote these provisions, make progress and gather data? The announcement of the policy and its progressive provisions cannot substitute for the implementation and progress for children under the policy. Marginalised communities fear that a generation of their children may become victims in the transition and the pandemic and lose out on education.

*Clear short term achievable timelines for implementation of the policy with special attention to marginalised children, needs to be put in place, monitored and reported to the parliament/legislatures and the public, at the national and state levels.*

**4. Ancient Indian Culture’ needs to include the rich diversity of marginalised and minority communities:**

The reference to ancient India, rich heritage and tradition is desirable but should be inclusive of the diversity and richness of all caste communities, ethnic communities, religious groups and other vulnerable communities. The marginalised communities are concerned if it will be an effort to over-ride the rich diversity of the communities and use education to promote Brahminic culture as the national culture. The diverse communities in India may not also have the wherewithal to include their culture in the face of the state promoting the Brahminical culture as the ‘rich heritage of ancient India’ and thus fear an onslaught on their culture and identity.

The policy also speaks about aligning the education system with the SDG 4 ‘equitable quality education and life-long learning opportunities for all’ -what inputs will be included to bridge the human rights-based approach to education under SDGs with the ancient norms of social exclusion from education and caste and gender biased knowledge building that created and perpetuated a hierarchical society?

*Wide public discussion and inclusion of marginalised communities in detailing the heritage, culture and tradition should become inbuilt while implementing the NEP.*

**5. Revisit SEDG category and affirm Constitutional categories:**

The Constitution recognises the diversity and disadvantages in caste, ethnicity and religion and provides them Constitutional recourse through education. Each of these communities include millions of children in further diverse situations. Social, economic, gender, disability and various other conditions are drivers of their unequal access and performance in education. The SSA-RTE framework for implementation acknowledges the diversity, differentials and inequality in education across various marginalised communities.

The NEP makes a new categorisation 'socio-economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs) and clubs the diverse categories of children, thereby undermining the work done previously. The categorisation creates confusion in its administration, difficulty to define, will include diverse categories across states and locations. Vulnerable communities will find it difficult to establish their inclusion/exclusion within the category. The clubbing together takes away the badly needed specific focus for children from the diverse vulnerable communities. It forecloses disaggregated data on these communities essential for creating specific policy provisions for them. There is even the danger of collapsing constitutionally recognised groups like the scheduled caste, scheduled tribe, religious minorities under the SEDG disempowering these communities and their rights. Marginalised communities consider this to be a disempowering step to their rights and entitlements.

*An apt strategy would be to deepen our understanding of the specific disadvantages of diverse marginalised children and build strategies to ensure their education and not leave them behind. The local government bodies (PRI and ULBs) can be mandated and facilitated to recognise, identify, track and promote the education of all vulnerable children in their jurisdiction. Constitutional categories should be maintained and further data disaggregation and specific policy focus should be encouraged in the implementation of NEP to reach the last child.*

#### **6. Revise equity– inclusion measures to achieve NEP:**

The lack of adequate social equity, inclusion measures and discrimination contribute to the educational inequalities between children from marginalised and dominant sections. The school closures and on-line teaching during the pandemic further makes the situation complex. The policy does not clarify what are the equity and inclusion measures that will be put in place to ensure that children from the marginalised communities will access equal quality education through the NEP. The promise of equal quality education without adequate provisions and mechanisms will only continue the current unequal trajectory.

The NEP refers to scholarships and equity measures, which are repetition of the existing schemes (see Annexe). Listing out the existing equity measures without analysing and aligning it to the requirements to access the new policy is a shoddy effort at best.

The policy speaks of curtailing dropout rates by ensuring infrastructure and tracking children in schools, which is similar to the plans made under the RTE Act and was not implemented. What will be done differently to ensure implementation under NEP?

Additionally, there are considerable numbers of children out of the education system for never being enrolled in schools even today. Extremely vulnerable children from nomadic communities, forest dwelling communities, street children, child workers, migrant children have 'never' been enrolled in schools. The policy does not outline steps to be taken to reach education to them.

*A realistic assessment of the scholarship and other equity measures need to be made based on the how dropout and never-enrolled children from marginalised community can access and benefit from the NEP. The systems to design and implement equity measures should be well established, timely, adequate and non-discriminatory for any child to access and complete 15 years of quality schooling.*

#### **7. Regulate private education to create an 'equal education environment':**

The NEP promotes private schools, mandating them to be philanthropic and non-profit making. There is every danger that this will continue the neglect of the public education system. Even poor and marginalised parents navigate to the private schools in the hope for better future for their children. In most cases, this is only a drain on their family financial situation without substantial improvement in their education. Private education has also seen a gender bias among poor parents who would rather invest in their sons than daughter's

education.

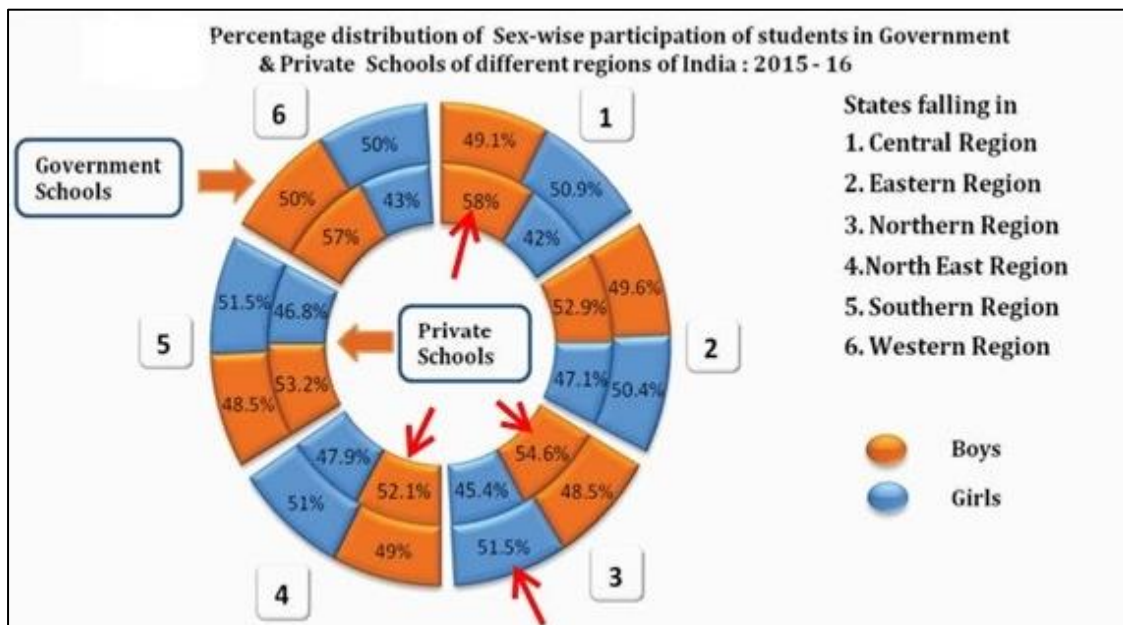


Figure above, shows the percentage distribution of boys and girls in private and government schools across the above-mentioned six regions. More boys are in private schools in Central and Northeast region. The percentage participation of girls in Government schools is highest in the Northern and Southern region.

The mechanisms to regulate private schools ensure equal quality of schooling and learning across the private and the public schools has not been realistic or effective. Elite private schools are set up by the socially and economically privileged and cater to the socially and economically privileged. The efforts under RTE Act to promote inclusion in the private schools to children from the 'disadvantaged and economically weaker sections' is yet to be positively and effectively institutionalised. One fears that the policy support to the private education will become a way of further neglect to public education attended by the large majority of marginalised children, and will continue the inequality in education.

*The regulatory and inclusion mechanisms for the private schools need to be effectively implemented, creating an 'education equalising environment' where all schools and children are given equal and inclusive education opportunities. Government should ensure the full and effective implementation of admission to children from the disadvantaged and economically*

*weaker sections in the private schools under the RTE Act. The quality of education provided under the private and public schools should be made equal quality.*

#### **8. Strengthen the RTE Act:**

The RTE Act was acclaimed as an important achievement of the government in making 8 years of free and compulsory education fundamental right to all children. RTE Act takes forward the Constitutional provisions of free and compulsory education to all children up to 14 years within 10 years of adoption of the Constitution (Art 45); promote the educational interests of SCs, STs, and other weaker sections (Art 46); facilities for mother tongue education (Art 350 (A)), and supports the educational engagement of minority communities (Art 29-30).

The RTE Act promises universalisation for the 6-14 years age group, till class 8. The NEP takes this process forward including the pre-primary and the higher secondary levels, but does not make it as part of the RTE framework. This takes away the important dimensions of 'fundamental rights and legal justiciability' that is embedded in the RTE Act under the Constitution Art 21 A. The Act also defined essential components of a school and its functioning. There does not seem adequate justification for the negligible reference to the RTE Act.

The NEP also speaks about making it easier for both governments and non-government to build schools with less emphasis on inputs and greater emphasis on outputs. One fears that the children from marginalised communities will attend schools with poor inputs/unregulated inputs and this would be justified under the policy.

*The NEP will serve marginalised communities better by linking the universalisation of 15 years of education with the RTE and provide legal justiciability. There needs adequate focus on the essential inputs, which are defined for a start in the RTE Act. The NEP needs to mandate that children will study in schools with the essential infrastructure and provisions for effective learning and development. Adequate budgets and monitoring mechanisms need to be put in place towards this.*

#### **9. Strategies to recover and rebuild from the COVID 19 pandemic:**

The primary space and source learning for children from the marginalised communities is the school environment and interface with teachers and other children. They have little other education resources –parents are not sufficiently educated, lack space and time for reading and learning, absence of reading and learning materials within the community and many other challenges to maintain their levels of learning. The shutting down of schools under the COVID 19, though essential, has pushed back their learning.

Further, children of migrant workers, who have returned to their native places face the challenge of not being enrolled in the local schools. The local schools may refuse to enrol them. The language of the local schools may be different from what they had in the parents' workplace. The largescale closing of government schools before the pandemic may seriously constrain the possibility to accommodate the migrant returnee children. The pandemic has also resulted in largescale closure of small private schools, which will add to the shortage of schools.

Under the lockdown, many families lost their employment and livelihood. To make ends meet, families may have engaged children to enter work and wage employment. Child labour and labour trafficking would have increased, making it difficult for many more children to re-join schools. While private schools and educated parents with basic resources have continued to support their children learn during the pandemic, this is not so for children from marginalised communities.

The policy does not outline the necessary steps to ensure children will come back to schools, that families where children are working will be supported to let children re-join schools. The policy does not outline how the learning process will be maintained and moved forward.

*The policy needs to recognise the challenges emerging from the pandemic and the lockdown. The challenges to maintain learning and resume schooling after the pandemic is diverse before diverse groups of children. This needs detailed attention, particularly that of the marginalised children. The country needs a detailed and realistic plan to put education back on its feet in the shortest time period possible, with special focus on the marginalised children. Investment and human resources necessary for meeting the challenge should be set aside and ensured. A continuous system of monitoring implementation and outputs is essential in the recovery and rebuilding phase.*

## 10. Need strategies and inputs to address the digital divide

The digital space is fast overtaking as a means for knowledge, information and access to services. The COVID 19 pandemic fastened this space with the closing of schools and on-line education. However, large proportion of marginalised children do not have the necessary infrastructure, equipment or resources to access on-line and digital forms of learning. The digital learning and information threaten to increase the education and learning divide than bridge it at this point in time. State interventions to bridge the gap for children without the access is essential to ensure the realisation of the NEP.

The NSSO 2017-18 figures report that only 24% of Indian households have internet access, of which only 11% own devices such as computers, tablets and laptops. What worsens the situation is poor electricity infrastructure in rural areas. Ministry of Rural Development in 2017-18, showed that 16 percent of India's households received one to eight hours of electricity daily, 33 percent got 9-12 hours and only 47 percent received more than 12 hours of power supply.<sup>4</sup> It is important to consider that majority of the schools and more than 50% of college students come from rural areas. Against these statistics and figures, the NEP talks about being ready for online and digital forms of education. However, the policy does not mention how this digital divide must be eliminated and infrastructure capacities improved. Structural inequalities and access to services are key determinants to determine which students can benefit from online education in India.

**Percentage of Households with Computer and Internet Facility**

Area	HH having Computer	HHs having Internet Facility
Rural	4.4	14.9
Urban	23.4	42
Total	10.7	23.8

Source: NSSO 75<sup>th</sup> Round 2017-18<sup>5</sup>

Out of every 100 persons in India, less than 40 are internet subscribers. In the rural context, for every 100 people, only 16 are internet users. Access to internet connectivity still remains a big challenge for rural households in India. When seen along with regional disparities, only 10-15% households in Chhattisgarh, Bihar and Orissa have access to internet facilities.

<sup>4</sup> <https://scroll.in/article/960939/indian-education-cant-go-online-only-8-of-homes-with-school-children-have-computer-with-net-link>

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/NSS75252E/KI\\_Education\\_75th\\_Final.pdf](http://www.mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/NSS75252E/KI_Education_75th_Final.pdf) (Page 47-48)



Geographical location also acts a major impediment in the case of Northeast and Jammu and Kashmir. The states with poor access to the internet are also the ones with poor human development indicators. Thus, the state wise disparity in access to the internet largely affects areas with poor, tribal and marginalised communities.

<b>Distribution of HHs with access to internet by social group where at least one student is currently enrolled in rural India (%), 2017-18</b>				
Level of Enrolment	Post-Graduation		Graduation Level	
Social Group	Access to Internet	No Internet	Access to Internet	No Internet
SC	19.2	80.8	22.7	77.3
ST	27.3	72.7	20.6	79.4
Other Caste	57.6	42.4	38.1	61.9
All Groups	33.6	66.4	28.4	71.6

Source: NSSO, 75<sup>th</sup> round data, 2017-18, Note: Other refers to the Non-OBC dominant caste in India

## **11. Digital divide -impact on vulnerable children**

Online education is not just about access to devices but also nuances. These nuances manifest in the form of rural urban divide, caste inequality and gender gap. A female belonging to a marginalised community in a rural area will have to bear the highest cost of online education. Only 2.9% individuals have access to computers and 8.9% to internet facilities in the poorest 20% households. The numbers are 27% and 50 % in the case of top 20% households.<sup>6</sup> These patterns are evident across class, region, gender, caste and geographical location.

Most marginalised communities do not have access to smartphones, even if they do, the connectivity is poor and the content is not available in vernacular languages. The proportion of females with the ability to use computers in rural areas was almost half of that of males. Even in urban areas, females are significantly behind in comparison to males in the ability to use computers for basic purposes. Socio cultural factors such as the perception of lower

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cbgaindia.org/blog/indian-education-cant-go-online-8-homes-young-members-computer-net-link/>

benefit of technology related skills for women and gender specific roles assigned to women further exacerbates the issue. In June, Devika, a 14-year-old Dalit girl committed suicide due to distress and uncertainty of lacking access to online education.<sup>7</sup> The needs of migrant workers and children are not considered enough in online teaching. Migrant workers and their children lack any medium for continuous education as they are constantly shifting places. Increase in dropouts from school due to online classes has aggravated the problem of child labour and trafficking to meet the economic needs of the family.

### **Percentage of Person 5 years and above able to operate Computer and Use Internet**

Area	Able to Operate a Computer			Able to Use Internet		
	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person
Rural	12.6	7	9.9	17.1	8.5	13
Urban	37.5	26.9	32.4	43.5	30.1	37.1
Rural & Urban	20	12.8	16.5	25.0	14.9	20.1

*Source: NSSO 75<sup>th</sup> Round 2017-18<sup>8</sup>*

Even during the COVID pandemic, private schools were quick to adopt to online classes with the support of well-off parents. The same cannot be said for the underprivileged students of government schools witnessing significant dropouts during this period. Virtual learning has benefits for the privileged and underprivileged only gets further marginalised. Low-income households do not have separate learning spaces in the house, this gives very limited space for young children to concentrate and learn even if they can afford a smartphone.

### **12. Language barriers in online education:**

NEP promotes regional language as a medium of instruction up to 5th grade and possibly beyond. However, the interesting aspect is that Indian languages regional languages have not ventured into cyberspace at all. Most of the online content is in English or does not suit the needs of the major portion of Indian students. This has already affected internet usage for millions of Indians. According to a FICCI report, over 200 million Indians could go digital with the availability of content in regional languages.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.freepressjournal.in/india/kerala-this-14-year-old-girl-allegedly-commits-suicide-as-she-could-not-attend-online-classes>

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/NSS75252E/KI\\_Education\\_75th\\_Final.pdf](http://www.mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/NSS75252E/KI_Education_75th_Final.pdf) (page 48)

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.ficci.in/ficci-in-news-page.asp?nid=17334>

The NEP plans to create an autonomous body, National Educational Technology Forum (NETF), to enhance learning, assessment, administration and so on as a platform for school and higher education. The body, however, exists on paper and any concrete plan for its implementation is still awaited.

In conclusion, reviewing the above issues, it is clear that the National Education Policy needs to be reviewed for their applicability and impact on the marginalised communities. The communities recognise the value and role of education and are keen to enhance education for children and young people. In the current context, the greatest potential for India to realise the youth population dividend lies in the large proportion of youth from the marginalised communities. One anticipates the country to create a policy that specifically addresses the challenges of such youth and promotes their education with special care. However, even as one recognises the progressive elements in the NEP, these are clearly not aligned with the realities of the children and youth from the vulnerable communities. It is doubtful the marginalised communities can use the provisions of the NEP in its current frame and provisions. It may yet again become the story of the fox being served its meal in a jar and the stork served in a plate. It is essential the NEP takes these challenges into consideration and makes necessary measures before rolling out the NEP.

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