



CLEAR CUT

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SHARP ANALYSIS, CLEAR VOICE.

October 2025 Edition

NEP@5

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020
Origins, current status, and the road ahead.

Top 10 Institutions

National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) 2025
Ministry of Education.

Dreams on Deadline

On the billboards that line Kota's
coaching strip, toppers smile like
movie stars.

Amitabh Kant

Tale of a Sherpa



₹100



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Editor's Note



*For the people, place, and
perspective that get overlooked.*

The first edition of Clear Cut was unveiled on 27 August 2025 at the Jaishankar Memorial Centre. The choice of venue was deliberate. JMC is a place where social reformers work quietly, yet with deep conviction, for the betterment of society. We also chose children from the centre's remedial education programme to release the magazine. Not a celebrity. Not a grand stage. That moment set the tone for what Clear Cut stands for, values rooted in authenticity, not spectacle.

To all our readers and subscribers, a heartfelt thank you. Your encouragement, constructive feedback, and honest critiques have helped shape the magazine. My gratitude also extends to the contributors who penned powerful stories and to the team that worked tirelessly to bring this vision to life.

Each edition of Clear Cut will focus on a single theme. This second edition turns to education – the true bedrock of any nation. As the National Education Policy 2020 completes five years, we examine its origins, its current status, and the road ahead.

We also bring insights from the latest UDISE+ report, the coaching industry, global innovations, policy champions, and even the role of artists and filmmakers in shaping the social sector.

On behalf of the entire team, thank you once again for your trust and support. With every page, we remain true to our promise:

Sharp Analysis. Clear Voice.

Regards,

Parash Kumar

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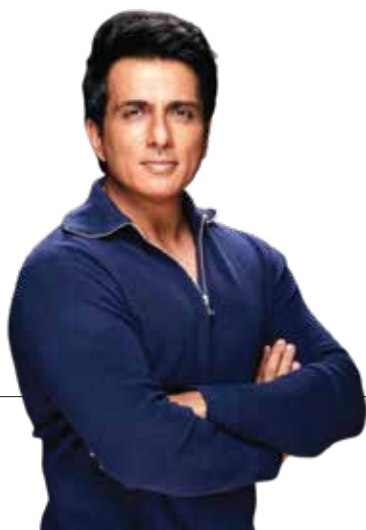
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WHAT THE WORLD'S TALKING ABOUT

CSIR Labs Drive Startup Transfers (India)



CSIR laboratories in Lucknow have created pathways for the utilization of technology for startups to support the transformation of scientific research into applicable business and agricultural opportunities. This announcement was made through the CSIR Startup Conclave, which was hosted on September 14th and 15th, 2025 at the National Botanical Research Institute (NBRI) in Lucknow. The conferees presented solutions to agriculture, value-added products, and exports, with a particular emphasis on honey and floriculture. Workshops that were organized provided farmers and entrepreneurs with information and methodologies to allow them to market their products, in order to find a way for farmers and entrepreneurs to take advantage of research in ways that lead to practical application. This project coincides with India's forward-looking commitment in policy to assure that scientific research does not only result in research output from laboratories, but transfers medium that can create measurable economic and social gains, marking the path towards India's goal for development through innovation.

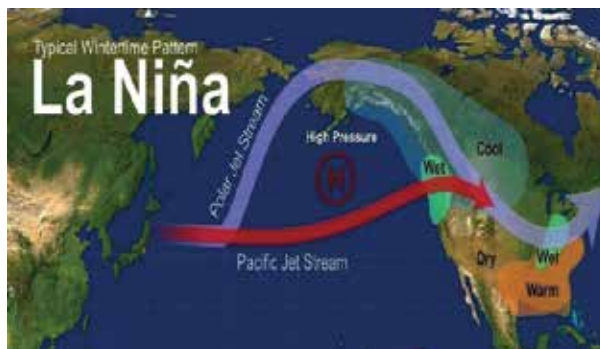
High-Level Panel to Scrutinize Tree Felling Projects in MP (India)

In September 2025, the Madhya Pradesh government established a nine-member committee including bureaucrats from the forestry and pollution control and environmental departments, to examine all development projects involving cutting down more than 25 trees. This action arises from the National Green Tribunal (NGT) order following backlash against the proposal to fell 700 trees in Neelbad-Barkheda Nathu to build a stadium and access road. The committee is tasked with balancing future development with environmental protection. The state has emphasized that they are trying to create sustainable practices in urban/rural planning.

Seva Parv: UP Forest Department's Green Push (India)

A new initiative, titled "Seva Parv," has been introduced in Uttar Pradesh from September 17 to October 2, 2025. This new initiative is set to promote ecological and civic engagement through a series of fourteen days of activities to promote environmental stewardship and sustainable living. Activities will include anti-plastic campaigns, clean-ups at bird sanctuaries, clearing invasive weed species, rainwater harvesting, and a campaign on water conservation for both cities and rural communities. A mass plantation drive was decided on September 25, 2025, in order to plant 1.5 million saplings across Uttar Pradesh. The event involved citizens, schools, industry, and NGOs, and it promoted collaborative engagement to build civic engagement around environmental stewardship and help create a culture of ecology.

La Niña Watch: India Might See a Colder Winter



Indian meteorologists are closely monitoring the possibility of a return of La Niña conditions in late 2025, which could produce colder winters across the country. La Niña refers to reduced sea surface temperatures in the central and eastern portion of the Pacific Ocean, which influences global weather patterns including in India. Experts state that if La Niña conditions develop between November–December 2025, then cold wave conditions are likely to occur across northern states of India and may threaten millions of people. Impacts would not be limited to physical discomfort, but also losses in agriculture from food stress, added energy needs for heating, and increased risk to public health, including respiratory illnesses and cold-related illnesses. There also could be an increased strain on urban and rural infrastructure in order to help cities and communities adjust to the harsher winter conditions.

Incentives for Carbon Capture as India Retains Coal in Energy Mix



India is looking to provide large increases in government support for Carbon Capture, Utilization and Storage (CCUS) technologies alongside its continued growth to coal based energy sources. NITI Aayog's 2025 strategy outline referred to industry projects that engage with CCUS and which could potentially receive incentives covering 50% to 100% of project expense as an example of increasing incentives. This, combined with the nation's stated commitment to decarbonizing future fossil-fuel based energy usage and current carbon emissions, signals that India intends to reduce emissions in accordance with fossil-fuel usage. However, it is simultaneous to ambitious growth in non-fossil based energy capacity of 500 GW, while coal fired growth, increments leading to an additional 97 GW by 2035 is anticipated.

Elon Musk's Starlink to Facilitate Direct Phone-Satellite Connectivity

SpaceX stated that the types of mobile phones it intends to promote will offer access to its Starlink satellite network beginning in late 2027, connecting directly to satellites rather than through ground-based telecom networks. The company anticipates the ability for those without standard cellular coverage, to begin streaming and browsing the Internet from remote locations on their devices. However, enabling mobile phones with satellite capability generally requires software and hardware updates to accommodate new frequency bands. Thus, new regulatory and licensing changes will also be required for governments to enable satellite access. This change represents a significant advancement in cloud communications generally, and could transform connectivity in rural and hard-to-reach areas especially over the next two or so years.

Punjab's 2025 Floods: Colossal Agricultural Impact

Punjab faced devastating floods starting from around 20 August 2025, which continued for several weeks. More than 1,400 villages and around 2.5 lakh acres (250,000 acres) of agricultural land were flooded, impacting the livelihoods of over 3.5 million people. In addition, over 20,000 people required evacuations as floods progressed through rural and urban locations. Crops were damaged and soil fertility was lost in agricultural fields along the Ravi, Beas and Sutlej Rivers, as well as the surrounding landscapes. The flooding was made worse by very high releases from the Pong, Ranjit Sagar and Bhakra dams, which contributed to downstream flooding. Relief and rehabilitation work continued into early September 2025, underscoring flood management and disaster preparedness principles.

Bhubaneswar's 6th Miyawaki Plantation Drive (India)



The Bhubaneswar Municipal Corporation (BMC) is set to embark on its sixth plantation drive using the Miyawaki method on October 5, 2025, with the aim of increasing urban green cover by creating dense native forests in small areas of the city. The Miyawaki method seeks to quickly return ecological stability by establishing small, layered, fast-growing forests that restore biodiversity, reduce air pollution, and naturally cool urban microclimates. The drive consists of densely planting native species and layering the planted species in the same order as a natural forest. The initiative anticipates significant forest growth in two to three years, while establishing a sustainable, green oasis for the citizens of Bhubaneswar, and improving ecological strength in the city.

WHO Starts Ebola Vaccinations in DRC

In September 2025, the World Health Organization (WHO) initiated an Ebola vaccination campaign in the Kasai Province of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in response to an outbreak. The first shipment consisted of 400 doses of the Ervebo vaccine, with an additional 45,000 doses soon permitted for shipment to suppress the spread. As of September 22, 2025, health officials reported 32 suspected cases, 20 confirmed cases, and 16 deaths, demonstrating a necessity for a rapid response. The campaign was yet another rapid attempt by WHO to prevent continued Ebola flare ups in Central Africa, where fragile health systems and high population movement further complicate containment measures.

India-UK Fund to Combat Environmental Antimicrobial Resistance

C-CAMP in Bengaluru has partnered with the UK's Global AMR Innovation Fund (GAMRIF) to provide new funding to tackle antimicrobial resistance (AMR) in the environment. The initiative, which was announced in September 2025, encourages innovative solutions for detecting, preventing and treating antibiotic residues in soil, water and air through grants of around £170,000 per startup or research team. The partnership seeks to support innovative research and development that could take action on the environmental transmission of AMR – an urgent one health and ecological challenge – through international research collaboration.

Emerging Technologies Altering the Global R&D Environment



Frontiers together with the World Economic Forum published a report that provides an overview of ten of the most promising emerging technologies with the potential to reshape various industries by 2025. Some of the more interesting field include but are not limited to osmotic power systems, green nitrogen fixation, engineered living therapies, autonomous biochemical sensing, and advanced nuclear technologies. Collectively, these technologies hold the global capacity to fundamentally transform sustainable infrastructure, health care, and climate action.

Leading Scientific Advances and Plant Science Breakthroughs in 2025

In 2025, an increasing number of innovators and researchers are focusing on crop science and biotechnology to contribute to solutions that promote food sustainability and resilience in agriculture. Significant advances this year in crop biotech innovations include new seeds that are drought tolerant, improved synthetic fertilizer products, and technologies targeted for minimizing post-harvest losses. Together these innovations will dovetail with existing technologies to assist farmers in confronting changing climate conditions. Although new technologies like gene therapy for drug-resistant focal epilepsy demonstrate the breadth of biotechnology research activities, the agricultural system is undergoing strategic innovations to sustain and improve crop yields, soil health, and resource efficiency. Sustainable agriculture aligned within the specialty of agricultural biotechnology has been identified as one of the 25 significant and urgent global research and development trends in 2025. This points to a real and growing prioritization of sustainable agriculture and climate-adaptive agriculture research and practices across the globe.

AI for Atmospheric Sciences: New Roadmap



On September 22, 2025, a recently released research report addressed a systematic and comprehensive approach to utilizing Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the field of atmospheric sciences. The study identifies that recent improvements in remote sensing, high-performance computing, and big-data analytics can help provide better forecast accuracy, enhanced climate process understanding, and better prediction of extreme weather events. The paper also identifies ongoing challenges, such as required infrastructure for data, managing the vast volumes of heterogeneous climate data, and coordinating models across scientific disciplines. Researchers contend that recognizing and addressing these challenges will be important if the full potential of AI is to be realized in climate and weather sciences within the next ten years.

Anchoring Rural Water Security: Jal Jeevan Mission's Focus on Source Sustainability



Asad Umar

To advance Sustainable Development Goal 6 (clean water and sanitation) and ensure equitable access to safe drinking water, the Jal Jeevan Mission, India's flagship rural water supply programme, has accelerated efforts to provide every household with an individual tap connection. Launched in 2019, with 17% of rural households having tap water, has now reached to 81% coverage, benefiting over 15.70 crore rural households. In addition to ensuring its core objective of providing access to potable water, the Mission has far-reaching multiplier effects, including preventing waterborne diseases, reducing the drudgery of fetching water, especially for women and girls, and enhancing livelihoods and productivity across rural communities.

As the country rapidly approaches its target of 100 percent household connection and with the extension of the Mission until 2028, the priority is to develop a comprehensive approach to sustain the gains made over the last five years under JJM. Since the majority of water supply schemes rely on groundwater sources, the key to long-term sustainability lies in implementing a groundwater management approach that is based on a thorough analysis of resource availability, associated water stress, and decentralized and participatory governance to manage it effectively. While policy-level priorities and national and state planning are comprehensive, they are essential to ensure the rapid progress of the Jal Jeevan Mission in addressing issues related to household water access in rural India.

However, the long-term sustainability of the rural water supply system hinges significantly on the availability of dependable water source. In recent years, water supply systems have faced significant challenges to water security, including the reliability of water supply sources due to competing water demands, over-extraction of groundwater, water pollution, and unequal distribution of water resources. Addressing water security is critical not only for the sustainability of water services, but also for the health and well-being of its citizens, which is closely linked to it.



India's per capita water availability has touched the water-stressed benchmarks and is expected to decline further towards water-scarce conditions by 2050. The country is facing a persistent water crisis, exacerbated by climate change, as well as a growing imbalance between supply and demand. A rapidly increasing population and urbanization have driven up water demands. At the same time, years of pollution and groundwater exploitation have significantly impacted both the quality and availability of groundwater, thus creating a genuine concern around the sustainability of water supply sources.

The Central Groundwater Board (CGWB) of India estimates that out of the total 7,089 assessment units across the country, 14% have been categorized as 'Overexploited', 12% units are at semi-critical stages, and 158 assessment units (2%), have been classified as Saline.

Similarly, according to a report by NITI Aayog, nearly 50 per cent of the springs in the Indian Himalayan Region (IHR) are drying up. The seasonal and overall decline in springs has affected not only the domestic water availability in remote villages but will also affect the flow of rivers such as the Ganga and the Brahmaputra.

The above situation reflects pressing challenges around water availability; however, to address these challenges, many states have implemented impactful initiatives & campaigns, as well as established the presence of scientific agencies for groundwater mapping and monitoring, along with water resources management and conservation programs. This has led to the strengthening of the links between the rural drinking water supply sector and multisector water resources management. In recent years, the positive outcomes of several targeted water conservation programmes have become quite visible.

According to the Groundwater Resource Assessment Report (2022), there has been a 3% reduction in the number of 'overexploited' groundwater units and a 4% increase in the number of 'safe' category units as compared to 2017. There was an improvement in groundwater conditions in 909 assessment units.

The Jal Shakti Abhiyan: Catch the Rain (JSA-CTR) campaign, initiated in 2019, emphasizes sustainable water management through active citizen participation, focusing on conservation, restoration, groundwater recharge, and reuse. In 2023, the campaign prioritized ensuring the long-term sustainability of drinking water sources in 150 districts identified under the Jal Jeevan Mission.

The Atal Bhujal Yojana (ATAL JAL), India's largest groundwater management initiative, empowers village communities to ensure sustainable water futures. It promotes groundwater conservation through community participation and demand-side management in seven water-stressed states—Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Haryana, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh. Pilot projects, such as "Managing Aquifer Recharge and Sustaining Groundwater use through Village-level Intervention," have shown promising outcomes across different states.



Hydrogeophysical Survey Vertical Electrical Sounding for underground layer information at Kujap Panchayat, Nagar Block, Gaya ji District, Bihar



Construction of Checkdam in Gaya ji District of South Bihar

Atal Bhujal Yojana complements the Jal Jeevan Mission in that it supports various supply-side interventions, such as the construction of check dams, farm ponds, and artificial recharge structures, which ultimately help ensure functional household tap connections are backed by stable groundwater tables. These integrated efforts are crucial to ensure that water supply expansion is aligned with groundwater conservation efforts for a lasting impact. Additionally, initiatives such as the National Aquifer Mapping and Management Programme (NAQUIM), which involve community engagement in mapping groundwater resources, are crucial for states to make informed decisions and ensure the provision of safe tap water.

The ever-increasing pressure on freshwater resources is also the key driver for utilising greywater. In India, it is estimated that 31 billion litres of greywater are generated daily. The lower contamination level of greywater provides an opportunity to reduce water scarcity by almost 50 per cent through its reuse. It is therefore necessary to devise plans and make India a water-secure country, safeguarding it from water scarcity.

At a time when water scarcity and quality issues are looming as an increasingly pressing challenge, the Jal Jeevan Mission is relying on participatory approaches and deploying innovative technologies in water management as a critical pathway to ensure sustainable

water sources. Finally, investing in water security will not only enhance water availability and quality but also contribute to the country's overall economic and social development.

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DEEP DIVE / *The Vanishing Students*

The Vanishing Students

India loses half its students
before graduation



Asmita Yadav

Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” - Nelson Mandela.

India has over 250 million school-going children, the largest student population globally. Nearly all begin school in the early years, with about 247 million enrolled in primary grades (UDISE+ 2024-25).

As students advance, enrolment drops sharply. By secondary school (Classes 9–12), only 47.2% which is about 118 million, remain. In higher education, just 70 million continue to colleges and universities (AISHE 2022).

The story of India’s education system, then, is not one of children never entering school, but of nearly 180 million dropping out before graduation. This silent exodus has profound consequences for employment, gender equality, and the nation’s demographic dividend.

The Great Secondary Cliff

At first glance, India’s schooling journey looks like a triumph of access. In the early years, nearly all children remain in school. Even through the preparatory stage (Classes 3–5), retention is healthy, and by the middle stage (Classes 6–8), it remains above 82%. But as the transition to secondary arrives, the curve nosedives. Less than half the children who started school make it to Class 12.

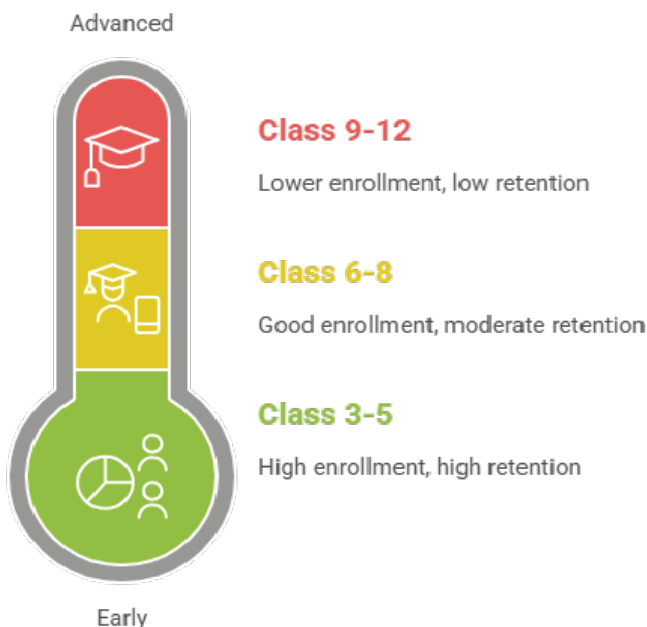
This sharp drop is not a matter of chance. Secondary school years bring greater academic demands and high-stakes examinations (UDISE+ 2024-25). Financial pressures also weigh heavily: children, especially in rural, low-income families, are frequently expected to contribute to household income. For girls, the barriers are often gendered; early marriage, domestic responsibilities, inadequate school infrastructure (such as toilets and menstrual hygiene facilities), and safety concerns push many out of

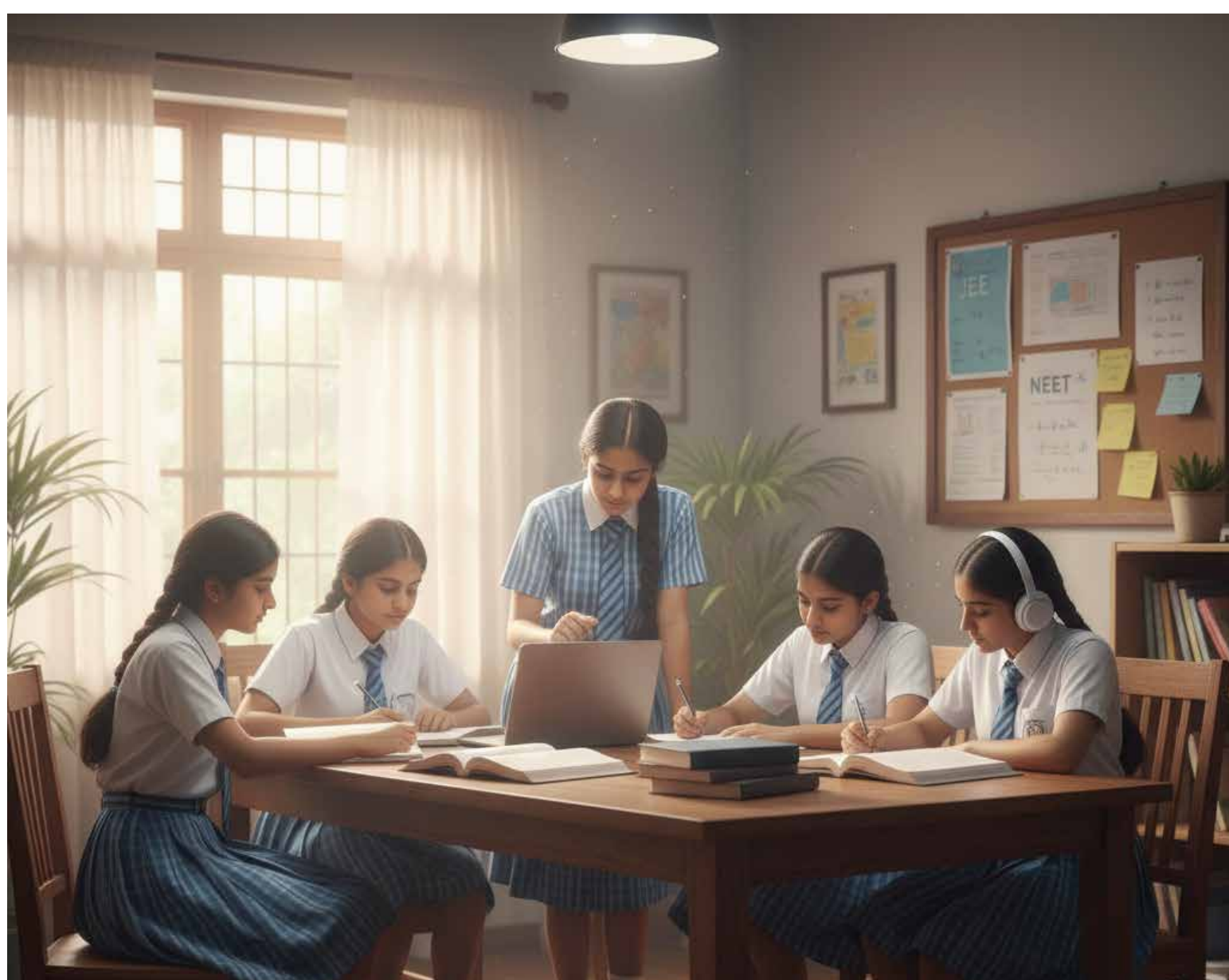
classrooms (Education for All in India). A study by DevInsights for CRY titled - Educating the Girl Child: Role of Incentivisation and Other Enablers and Disablers, also confirms these patterns. Conducted across four states with 1,604 respondents, girls identified their own decision to stop schooling (54%), household chores (42%), and distance to schools as the leading reasons. Interestingly, more than half of these girls wished to continue education if given the opportunity, showing that aspirations remain strong but are curtailed by barriers at home and in the community.

An analysis of state-level UDISE+ 2024-25 data compared student retention rates with the availability of school infrastructure.

The results demonstrate a strong correlation between infrastructure and retention. The presence of computers ($r = 0.633$, $p < 0.001$) and functional toilets ($r = 0.577$, $p < 0.001$) is particularly significant, especially for adolescent girls. Access to drinking water ($r = 0.469$, $p = 0.003$) also positively influences retention. These findings suggest that infrastructure is as critical as pedagogy for maintaining student enrolment. To understand the drivers behind these steep dropout rates, an analysis, using state-level UDISE+ 2024-25 data, compared retention rates with the availability of school infrastructure. The results demonstrate a strong correlation between infrastructure and retention.

Education stages show declining retention as students progress.





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The Vanishing College Cohort

If secondary is the cliff, higher education is the narrowing funnel. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education stands at 28.4% (PIB). This figure lags behind the global average of around 40%, and far below countries like China (over 60%).

This simply means that out of 100 children who enter Class 1, fewer than 30 will eventually step into a college lecture hall. The rest will navigate adulthood with far fewer chances for secure, well-paying employment. For a country banking on its youth bulge to fuel growth, this is not just an educational concern; it is also an economic warning bell.

A Gendered Story

The picture shifts when seen through the lens of gender. Interestingly, UDISE+ figures suggest girls slightly outperform boys in secondary retention (49.6% vs 45%). The GPI at all-India level is measured as a ratio of GER of girls to GER of boys, stood at above one at all levels,

indicating a more proportionally higher participation of girls compared to boys. But data points cannot capture lived realities. Girls may enrol, but many face constraints that limit their full participation: lack of safe transport, inadequate sanitation facilities, the stigma around menstruation, and societal pressure to marry early. Even when they continue into higher education, they are clustered in humanities and teacher-training courses, underrepresented in STEM, law, and professional tracks (IERJ, 2025).

As per NFHS 5, boys, meanwhile, are more likely to drop out due to economic pressure to contribute to family income. The gendered reasons differ, but the outcome is the same: millions of young people never make it to graduation.

A Tale of Two Indias: Regional Contrasts

The national averages mask stark regional inequalities. Southern and western states consistently outperform the north, east, and north-east.

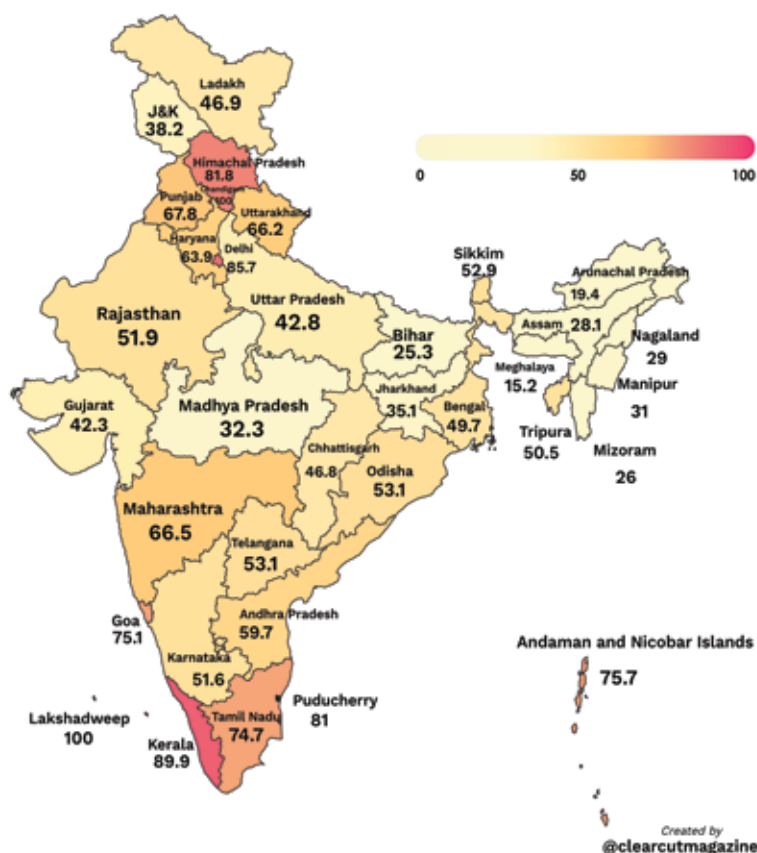
- Kerala (89.9%), Tamil Nadu (74.7%), and Himachal Pradesh (81.8%) boast some of the highest retention rates at the secondary stage. These states benefit from decades of investment in public education, mid-day meal schemes, strong community involvement, and better gender-friendly infrastructure.

- In contrast, Bihar (25.3%), Assam (28.1%), Meghalaya (15.2%), and Madhya Pradesh (32.3%) show alarmingly low figures. Here, poverty, distance to schools, weaker infrastructure, and entrenched social barriers drive attrition.

- Maharashtra (66.5%) and Goa (75.1%) stand out as western success stories, while Uttar Pradesh (42.8%) and Jharkhand (35.1%) reveal the northern struggle.

- Union Territories like Chandigarh, Lakshadweep, Puducherry, and Delhi post retention rates above 80-100%, highlighting the advantage of smaller populations and urban concentration.

The regional gender story is equally nuanced. In Chhattisgarh, girls (54.7%) significantly outperform boys (39.3%). In Tamil Nadu, the gap is also wide (80.2% vs 69.4%). Yet in states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, both genders record low retention, suggesting systemic issues that go beyond gender. In short, where a child is born can determine whether he/she reaches Class 12 or not. The geography of education is, in many ways, the geography of opportunity.



The Cost of Dropouts

The consequences of this broken pipeline reverberate far beyond the classrooms. With half of students dropping out before Class 12, and three-quarters of young adults never entering higher education, India risks a workforce that is under-skilled for the modern economy. Most dropouts are absorbed into informal, low-wage jobs with little security or upward mobility. For women, the stakes are even higher. Education is strongly correlated with delayed marriage, reduced fertility, improved maternal and child health, and greater labour force participation. Each girl who leaves school before Class 12 loses not just her chance at a degree, but also the broader empowerment education brings.

Closing the Gap

The consequences of this broken pipeline reverberate far beyond the classrooms. With half of students dropping out before Class 12, and three-quarters of young adults never entering higher education, India risks a workforce that is under-skilled for the

modern economy. Most dropouts are absorbed into informal, low-wage jobs with little security or upward mobility. For women, the stakes are even higher. Education is strongly correlated with delayed marriage, reduced fertility, improved maternal and child health, and greater labour

Conclusion

India's education story is one of paradox. Nearly every child begins the journey, but half vanish before finishing school and three fourth vanish till enrolling in higher education. The dropout is silent but devastating, draining the country of talent and narrowing the possibilities for millions. The question is not whether India can enrol children in schools; it can, and it has. The question is whether it can keep them there long enough for education to truly transform lives. Unless the "missing class" of secondary and college students is reclaimed, the promise of India's demographic dividend will remain unfulfilled.

Dreams on Deadline: Inside India's Coaching Machine



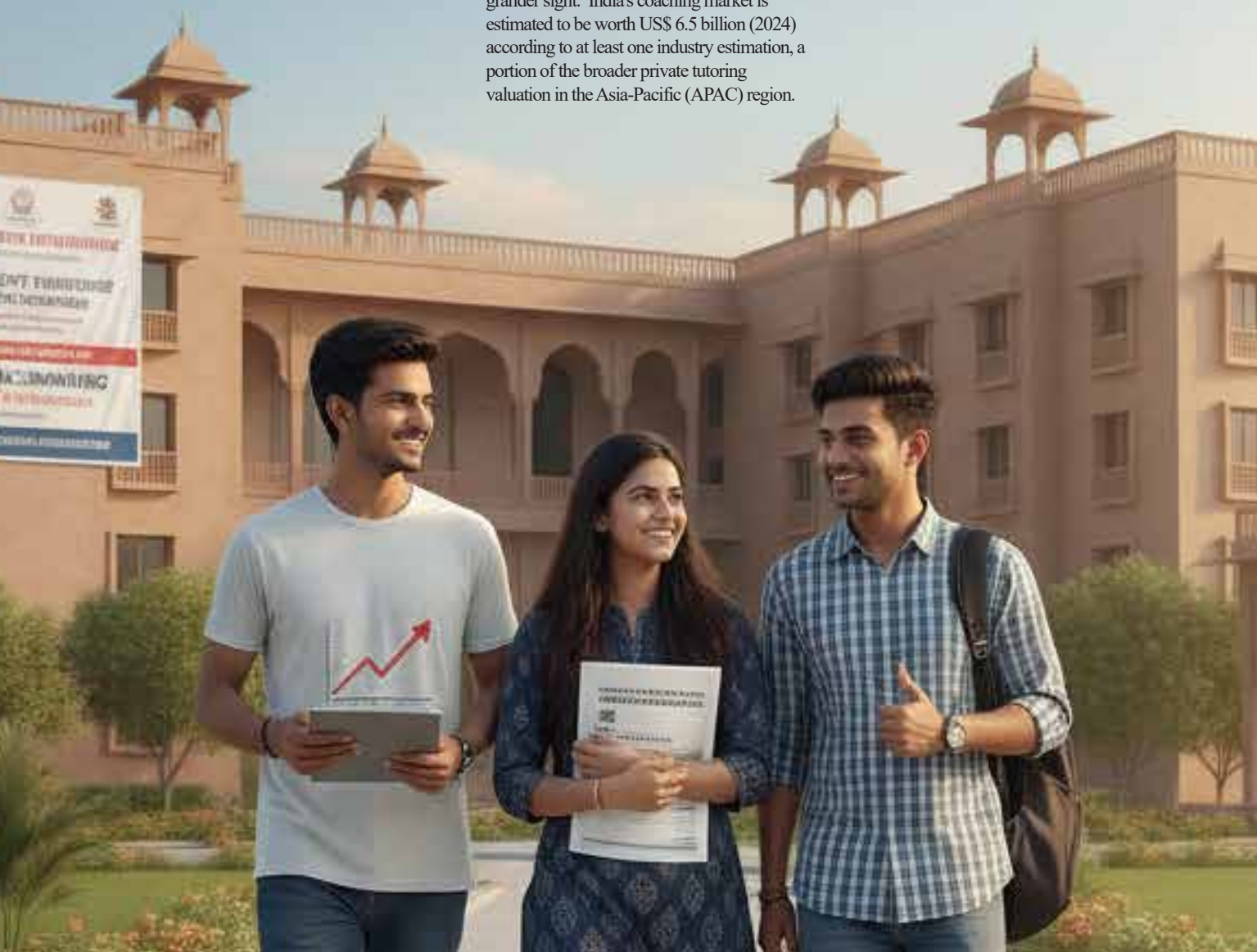
Antara Mrinal

On the billboards that line Kota's coaching strip, toppers smile like movie stars. As ceiling fans silently stir like the rocket launchers employed for students at the stream of Kota's coaching, somewhere in the middle lies India's greatest visibility paradox: multibillion-rupee industry profiting from aspiration, and a generation traversing the stress of turning aspiration into rank, score, and seat.

The Commerce of Aspiration

For two decades, Kota has been the finish line India runs to, when the race is JEE or NEET. In a normal year, 2 - 2.5 lakh students make their way, in 2024, this sank to only 85,000 - 1,00,000 due to new rules and bad PR, but the city still spun out ₹3,500 crore in annual revenue, down from ₹6,500 - 7,000 crore previously, reported by industry stakeholders. To zoom out and view the machine is an even grander sight. India's coaching market is estimated to be worth US\$ 6.5 billion (2024) according to at least one industry estimation, a portion of the broader private tutoring valuation in the Asia-Pacific (APAC) region.

At the family level, this comes at a price. A year in Kota means tuition, hostel, meals, tests is usually closer to ₹1.5 - 3 lakh+ (this range is typical reporting for the sector; fee card receipts from institutes included routine classroom proposals for a single year at around or above ₹85,000 - ₹1,70,000 plus taxes, excluding test series and housing options). "Rank is the currency. Time is the tax."



Pressure: At Home, At Class, On the Clock!

The pressure, however, does not start at Kota; it is first built up at home and school. An NCERT survey of approx. 3.8 lakh students (2022), found that 81% of students experienced anxiety caused by studies, exams, and results, which is a stark and nationwide baseline that happened before the coaching “finish line.”

Across many more recent nationwide checks, alarms are still ringing: the 2025 Student Well -Being Pulse (IC3 Institute & CISCE) reported that about 1 in 5 high-schoolers feel “rarely” calm or motivated, and about 40% do not have answers for where to find help with school, both of which are visible signs of ongoing distress tied to academic and career anxiety.

To drive the point home, let's look at it through some numbers :

- JEE Advanced 2024: 1,80,200 students took both papers; 48,248 students qualified.
- IIT seats (Joint Seat Allocation Authority, 2024): 17,740 seats across 23 IITs. Even if every seat was filled by a first-time qualifier, these numbers still equate to 1 seat for 10 students who sat the Advanced, and so only a small fraction of the larger pool who began the journey with the JEE Main.

This funnel is wide at the top, needle-thin at the bottom, producing the expected outcome: a large number gave a sincere effort; most did not “convert.” Most of the people, who did not convert into something, should never have been on that track anyways, and often missed similar trajectories they would have excelled in. This is what counselors refer to as “opportunity cost disguised as preparation.”



When the Dream Hurts

Suicide remains the most piercing public-health indicator. The National Crime Records Bureau's (NCRB) Accidental Deaths and Suicides in India (ADSI) data looks at suicide rates for 2022, the latest available data nationally. It shows the suicide rate rising to 12.4 per lakh. Suicides by students are 7.6% of all suicides down marginally from 2021. Independent syntheses look at student suicides, over 13,000 a year. Kota has swung, in added multitude, in horror and reform. The district mandated spring-loaded “anti-suicide” fans in 2023 after 26 young people committed suicide, and then announced a raft of measures; they discontinued the 2024 statistics at lower(17) and as of early of May 2025 (14) - very, very fragile improvements, not a solved crisis.

On a regulatory basis, Rajasthan issued guidelines in 2023 to help manage stressors on young people there: prohibiting glorification of toppers (top achieving students) from their profile or

graduation, requiring educational institutes keep company routine test results confidential, recommended using alphabetical sections over rank-segregated or best to worse categorical sections, make it easy for students to leave and require refunding fees, students should only go to coaching classes after Class IX age minimum; the Education Ministry also issued guidelines to regulate coaching centres at a national level.

Hostels, one of their hidden settings, are being put at centre frame. The Kota administration issued their city decorum list of regulations regarding security-fee and standards for hostels. It remains to be seen how they manage enforcement.



Hope in Numbers : Commercialization Meets Culture

A Netflix series illustrated a truth that those in the system already understood: coaching is an industry, and industries optimize for growth. The product is "rank probability." Marketing emphasizes the "toppers"; and parents do what parents do; teenagers self-select

*Not getting into IIT is not failure.
Getting trapped in a path you
shouldn't be on, that's the real loss*

into a high-stakes, high-variance gamble. What else does a high-performing, high-achieving

fifteen-year-old do? The Return on Investment (ROI) for the 17,740 who get seats at IIT every year is remarkable; the 1,826,895 and 89% of our future generation who do not receive funding for IIT or notional IIT are not so fortunate in their mathematical endeavor (even if they were likely better off in school).

Meanwhile, fees creep upward, there are more opportunities for mock tests, and student sleep declines. In this environment, parental pressure (often well-meaning) and institutional incentives can combine in a pressure-cooker that excludes other possibilities, nurturing the arts, or not solely living at the vocational level, state

universities with decent placements, or palliating other possibilities like gap years with counseling support.

"Not getting into IIT is not failure. Getting trapped in a path you shouldn't be on, that's the real loss."

Opportunities Lost That Aren't Advertised in Public

Late specialization: Less-than-strong fundamentals result in students struggling through ultra-advanced syllabi, while they are wasting years building weekend employable skills in diploma/degree programs better aligned with their aptitude.

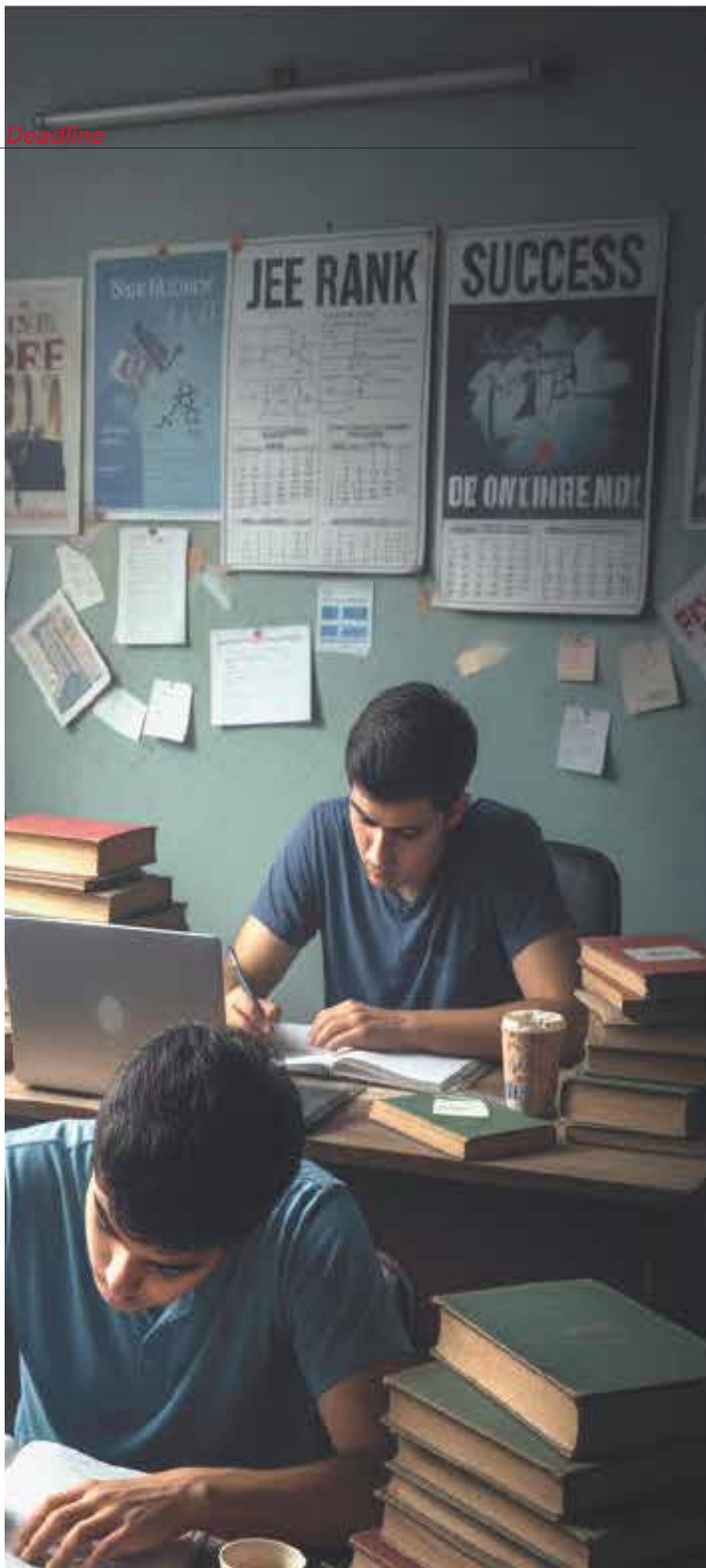
Single-exam myopia: JEE/NEET prep engulfs students so completely that they may forget to check on state CETs, AP polytechnic courses, design/commerce entrance tests, and an apprenticeship in the same field which lets them earn job income in a shorter time frame.

Geographical ignorance: Tier 2 and Tier 3 public universities are steadily improving their labs and placement opportunities, but they often get overlooked. Many families from smaller regions end up paying high housing costs in metro cities just to enroll their children in brand-name private courses, even though the outcomes are often similar to what local institutions can now provide.

What Has Improved, and What Still Must

In Rajasthan, recent steps to remove public rank-shaming, ensure privacy for standard test results, and gain consensus for new safety legislation for hostels, are small, but significant steps toward relieving some of the pressure on students. Policymakers are also looking at a broader level to regulate coaching practices and the increasing demand for coaching institutions. Together, these reforms illustrate the desire for a better balance between academic ambition and student wellbeing.

There still remain several opportunities for reforming the pressures within India's coaching system. To begin with, there could be an aptitude-first entry process that includes the use of diagnostics, screening tests, and family advisories by trained, registered counselors.



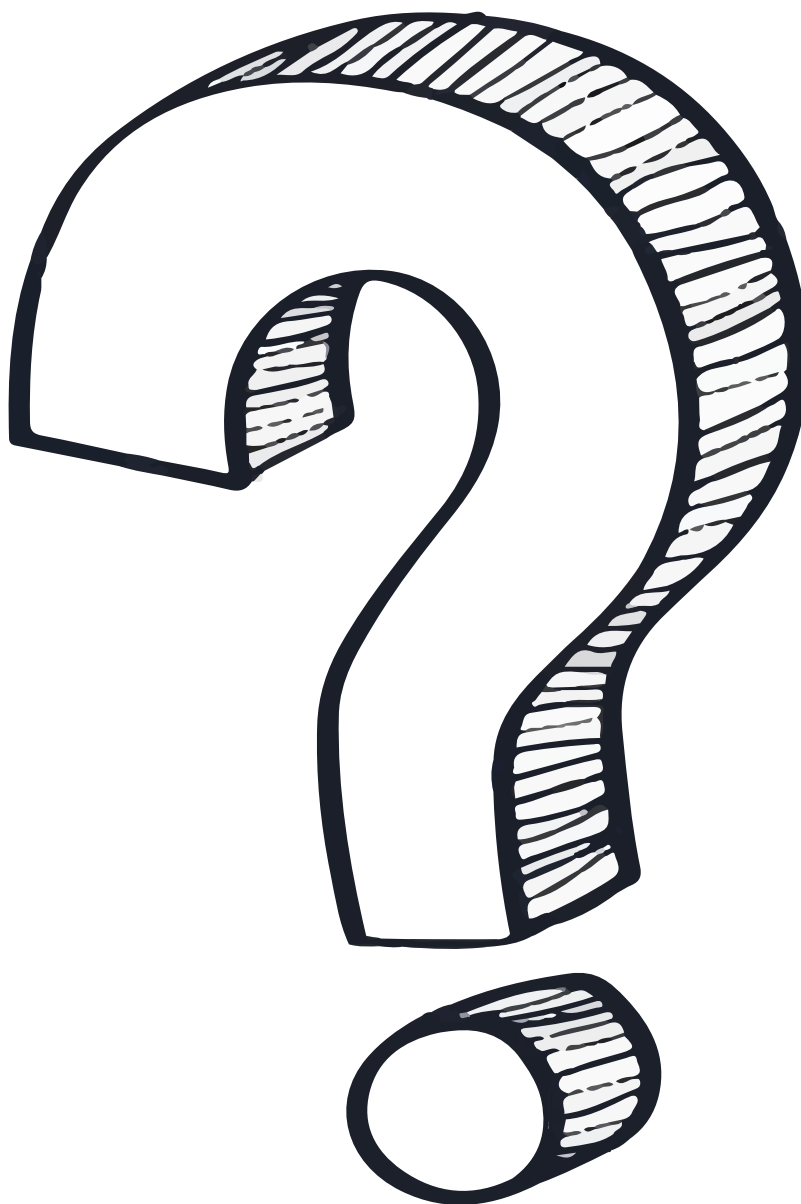
This could search for evidence of why families may pay upwards of a year's salary for a program that may not be appropriate for their child to enter, as Rajasthan is seeking to pilot. The same could also be said about setting statutory counseling ratios and family-friendly timetables respecting sleep and weekends instead of endless cycles of assessments, and then standardizing the terms of refunds along with dignified approaches to exiting students from programs also when it is now clear there is no future for them. Then there is proven need, beyond IITs and AIIMS, to regulate government-led community campaigns aimed at promoting longevity in aspiration, perhaps to pursue a polytechnic, an apprenticeship, nursing, allied health, state university honors in the future.

Finally, each month generally, parents would be able to pull up aggregate data in dashboard form that addresses their child's wellbeing, including council use, hospitalizations, opps, transfers to other private or public institutions, linked to enforceable safety standards, for each situation and school would be meaningful for parents and policy makers. Consequently, all this would consider the future of the sector, without jeopardizing student wellbeing.

A Humane Reset

Education in India is more than the 17,740 IIT seats. It's about the millions, for whom learning should unlock dignity, income and curiosity. The optimized version of the Kota model is brilliant at identifying; however, it's also brilliant at sorting.

If 'Kota Factory', gave us a mirror, the next chapter we write for ourselves needs to feel different; coaching that find the right fit, parents who value growth rather than rank, schools that embrace diverse measures of success, and an education system where help is visible, accessible and stigma-free. Because in a country as young as ours, hope shouldn't come with a seat belt.





ECO WARRIOR AWARDS

Organised by



IFS Officers Association



Indian Masterminds

Indian Forest Service officers have been working round the clock to make the country livable. They are vanguards of our environment – the green warriors – combating climate changes and vagaries of the weather. They also have to protect the forests from human interference like deforestation and poaching, often without much needed arms and ammunition, besides adequate support from the law and administration. Yet, they largely remain unsung as they work mostly in deep forests, away from the limelight of state capitals and the media. To salute their indomitable spirit Indian Masterminds in association with IFS Association launched Eco Warrior Awards in 2023.

Award for Forest Conservation 2025

Mr. Irfan Rasool Wani, CCF Kashmir



Irfan Rasool Wani: Champion of Conservation in Kashmir

– **Wular Lake Conservation:** As Coordinator of Wular Conservation & Management Authority, Wani led efforts to protect Asia's largest freshwater wetland. Installed high-definition CCTV surveillance with Forest Protection Force, curbing poaching and reclaiming ~5 sq km from illegal encroachments.

– **Greening Kashmir:** Supervised planting of over 140,000 saplings (conifers, Chinar, fruit, medicinal) to combat soil erosion and enhance forested/urban landscapes, collaborating with University of Kashmir. Forest Leadership: Rose from Conservator of Forests (North Circle) to Chief Conservator of Forests (Kashmir). Held roles like Joint Director of Forest Protection Force and led Social Forestry initiatives.

– **Chinar Day Initiative:** Launched "Chinar Day" in March 2025 in Srinagar, promoting chinar tree planting, urban forestry, and cultural-environmental awareness.

Career Path: Joined Indian Forest Service (J&K cadre, ~2006). Promoted to Conservator (2020) and Chief Conservator, balancing policy and on-ground action.

– **Impact:** Reduced poaching, expanded green cover, and set a model for wetland conservation with innovative tech. His work blends environmental stewardship with Kashmir's cultural heritage.

Award for Wildlife Conservation 2025

Dr Sonali Grover, Director of Kaziranga National Park



Rescue in the Midst of Floods

In 2024, Dr. Sonali Ghosh, Field Director of Kaziranga National Park, led a heroic effort to save wildlife during Assam's devastating floods. Her team used anti-poaching camps as shelters and created animal corridors, rescuing countless rhinos, elephants, and deer.

– Zero Rhino Poaching

Dr. Ghosh achieved zero poaching of one-horned rhinos through advanced surveillance, stronger patrols, and community involvement, setting a national conservation standard.

– Expanding the Reserve

With over 1,500 staff and 200 anti-poaching camps, Dr. Ghosh expanded Kaziranga to 1,300 sq km, enhancing habitats for elephants, buffalo, deer, and tigers.

– Adopting Technology

She introduced drones, camera traps, and M-STriPES monitoring to combat floods and conflicts, alongside elevated refuges and rapid-response teams.

– Promoting Eco-Tourism

Dr. Ghosh boosted sustainable tourism with cycling trails, boating, birding, and educational workshops, balancing conservation with community benefits.

– Recognition

2025, she received Assam's Karmashree Award for her flood relief and road-risk mitigation efforts.

Award for Wildlife Protection 2025

*Mr. Praveen Kaswan, Director,
Jal Jal Da Pura National Park*



Parveen Kaswan: The Officer Reviving India's Wildlife

– Social Media Star, Poacher's Nemesis

Parveen Kaswan, an Indian Forest Service officer, uses his camera to capture stunning wildlife imagery, from Jaldapara's rhinos to Kurseong's rare melanistic leopard, "Bagheera." His viral posts on X and Instagram inspire millions while exposing poachers and smugglers, making him their scourge.

– Conservation Through Social Media

Unlike typical bureaucrats, Kaswan leverages social media to spark environmental awareness, sharing wildlife photos and conservation insights. He balances influence with ethical responsibility, educating a vast audience.

– Innovative Green Initiatives

Kaswan promotes sustainability creatively—his visiting cards, embedded with basil seeds, grow into tulsi plants, turning small gestures into eco-friendly reminders.

Frontline Wildlife Protector

Stationed at Jaldapara National Park, Kaswan manages anti-poaching camps and protects one-horned rhino habitats. Previously at Buxa Tiger Reserve, he patrolled volatile borders, monitored wildlife, and engaged communities to curb poaching.

– Advocating Clean Forests

Through social media, Kaswan calls out littering in forests, sharing images of officers cleaning up and urging tourists to "behave like animals" who don't trash nature. His posts drive reflection on environmental responsibility.

Wildlife Insights

Award for Community Connect 2025

*Ms. KM Abharna, Faculty
of CASFOS Dehradun*



K. M. Abharna, a 2013-batch Indian Forest Service officer, is a beacon of courage and empathy in wildlife conservation. Now a faculty member at CASFOS, Dehradun, she trains young officers with her expertise in wildlife management and forest protection.

– Avni Conflict: Leadership Under Pressure

In 2017, as Deputy Conservator of Forests in Pandharkavda, Maharashtra, Abharna tackled the controversial Avni (T1) tigress case, linked to 13 human deaths. Facing local outrage, she deployed an all-women forest guard team, set up camera traps, and ensured real-time monitoring. Despite Avni's eventual death, Abharna's efforts saved the tigress's cubs and earned her the title "Real-life Sherni," inspiring the 2021 film Sherni.

– Kaziranga & Assam: Conservation Innovator

In Kaziranga National Park, Abharna led zero-poaching efforts for one-horned rhinos, banned plastics, and curbed illegal fishing. As Assistant Conservator in Assam's Dergaon Range, her 2015 community-based study on the 'monkey menace' across 40 villages pioneered participatory conservation.

– Beyond Wildlife: Sustainable Impact

As Director of Maharashtra's Bamboo Research & Training Centre, she promoted bamboo-based livelihoods, showcasing her commitment to sustainable rural economies.

– A Trailblazer in a Male-Dominated Field

Joining the IFS when women officers were rare (only 284 among 5,000 frontline staff today), Abharna broke barriers with her resilience and leadership.

– Legacy at CASFOS

Today, Abharna imparts lessons of empathy, scientific monitoring, and moral courage to future forest officers, shaping the future of conservation.

Award for Best Use of Technology 2025

Dr. S K Shrivastava, APCCF Research and Training Gujarat



Dr. S. K. Shrivastava, a 1996-batch Indian Forest Service officer and Additional Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Research & Training), Gujarat, has revolutionized conservation using digital tools and open-source innovation.

– **Wildlife Helpline:** A 24x7 zero-cost helpline (8320002000) with SMS, WhatsApp, and QR code access to nursery maps and wildlife staff contacts.

– **Snake Rescuer App:** Connects citizens to certified snake rescuers with OTP-verified handovers for accountability.

– **Karuna Abhiyan:** Mapped 1,000 bird rescue centers for the annual Save Bird Campaign during kite-flying season.

– **Mega Project Management:** Managed the ₹1,000-crore PERG project using Google Sheets and QGIS, saving crores with mobile-friendly maps.

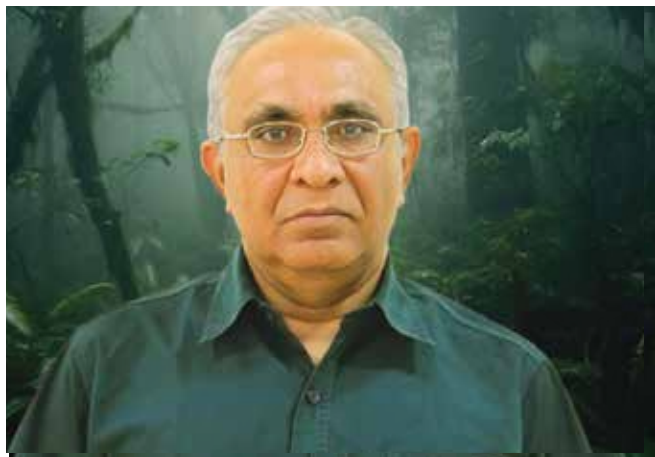
– **Digital Monitoring:** Digitized First Offence Reports and patrolling, resolving 6,000+ cases with a 43-day average closure time, using free apps like Open Camera and Google Fit.

– **Nursery Monitoring:** Developed a transparent digital system for bed-wise nursery stock details and a CPT Tree Locator app for seed collection.

– **MIS and GIS Revival:** Revamped the Gujarat Forest Department's MIS for staff and compensation tracking, and democratized GIS with smartphone-based NDVI and slope mapping.

Lifetime Achievement Award 2025

Dr. H.S Singh, former PCCF Gujarat



Dr. H. S. Singh, a distinguished Indian Forest Service officer, is renowned for his pivotal role in reviving the Asiatic lion population through Project Lion. His work transformed the Gir landscape into a global conservation success, increasing the lion population from 180 in the 1970s to over 400 by 2010, with wild prey rising thirteenfold and lions shifting to rely on wild prey for nearly three-fourths of their diet. Singh's research also addressed lions dispersing into human areas, shaping policies for habitat management and community coexistence.

Beyond lions, he contributed to conserving species like the Great Indian Bustard, wild buffalo, and Sarus crane. Singh authored key works, including *The Gir Lion* (2007) and *The Asiatic Lion: Reviving the Pride of Gir* (2016), alongside numerous scientific papers. His career included roles as Chief Wildlife Warden, Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, and Chairman of the Gujarat Biodiversity Board.

Born in 1954 in Allahabad, Singh studied physics before earning a Ph.D. in wildlife from Saurashtra University. His accolades include the Forestry Service Medal (1993), Brandis Prize (1998), Chaturvedi Prize, ICFRE Award, and Elsevier Biological Conservation Review Award (2014).

RAJESH SINGH

For this edition, Clear Cut sat down with Rajesh Singh, Country Director of ChildFund International, for a wide-ranging conversation on the future of education. From the promise of NEP 2020 and the centrality of foundational learning, to the challenges of equity, teacher capacity, digital innovation, and CSR partnerships. This interview brings sharp insights from the frontlines of change.

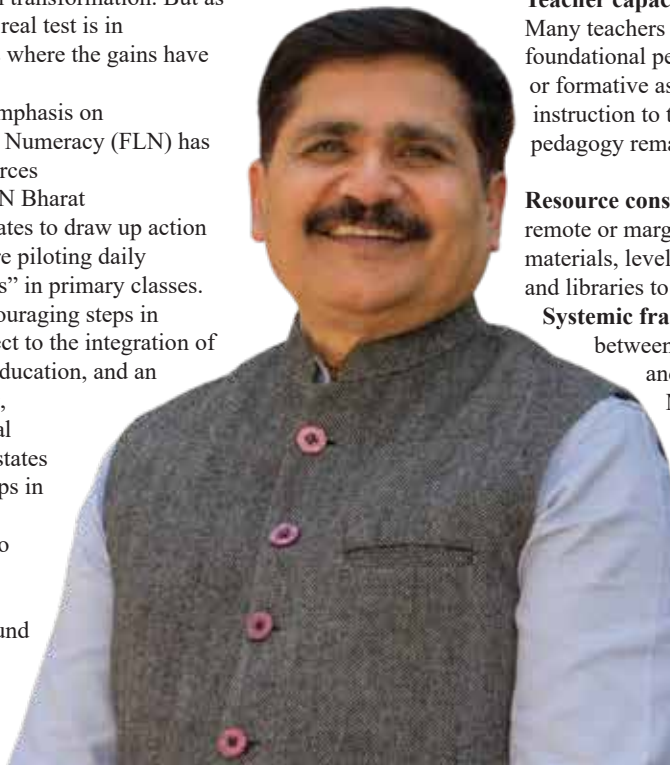
1. Reflecting on NEP 2020's journey so far, what's your assessment of its implementation on the ground?

NEP 2020 is an inspiring and ambitious policy that charts a long-term vision for India's education transformation. But as with any large reform, the real test is in implementation and that is where the gains have been uneven.

On the positive side, the emphasis on Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) has shifted attention and resources to early grades. The NIPUN Bharat mission has galvanized states to draw up action plans, and several states are piloting daily "literacy-numeracy periods" in primary classes. Further, we have seen encouraging steps in implementation with respect to the integration of early childhood care and education, and an emphasis on skill-building, multilingualism, and digital learning. However, many states are still struggling with gaps in infrastructure, teacher availability, and capacity to drive adaptive pedagogy.

In the areas where ChildFund works, we see political will and awareness rising but transitioning from policy to pedagogy, ensuring routine formative assessment, and sustaining accountability across levels (state, district, school) remain significant challenges.

There is also a need to integrate Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), and digital safety more strongly within the implementation roadmap. In that sense, NEP's vision is ahead of ground realities, and much depends on states, civil society, and local leadership to close that gap.



2. Foundational learning was placed at the heart of NEP. What structural or systemic challenges still hinder progress toward universal FLN?

This is central to whether NEP can succeed. Some of the core challenges are:

Teacher capacity and mindset:

Many teachers have not been trained in foundational pedagogy, multilingual teaching, or formative assessment. Shifting from rote instruction to thinking-based, scaffolded pedagogy remains a steep transition.

Resource constraints: Schools, especially in remote or marginalized areas, lack reading materials, levelled text books, manipulatives, and libraries to support early learners.

Systemic fragmentation: Coordination between pre-school (or ECCE), primary, and remedial systems is weak.

Many children enter Grade 1 without readiness, and remedial systems are often not robust. Monitoring and feedback loops: Many states lack real-time data systems to monitor FLN progress. Even when data exists, linking it to teacher support or course correction is weak. We still need stronger, context-sensitive tools to track not just enrolment, but actual learning outcomes.

Language diversity: while NEP emphasizes mother tongue instruction, appropriate multilingual teaching materials and trained teachers are still limited.

Equity gap: The kids from the poorest households, girls, tribal communities, children with disabilities, or those speaking minority languages often lag most. The base from which they start is very low, and without deliberate, differentiated support, the gap widens.



3. How do you see the education system responding to the needs of marginalized children under NEP—girls, tribal children, children with disabilities?

NEP 2020 has created an important framework for inclusive education, with a strong emphasis on socio-economically disadvantaged groups including girls, tribal children, and children with disabilities. We are beginning to see positive shifts, greater focus on mother tongue-based learning, gender-sensitive curricula, and provisions for children with special needs. However, on the ground, the response is still uneven. ChildFund India works in contexts where social disadvantage is already pronounced, so we see both progress and continuing risk.

Progress:

- Some states are explicitly earmarking resources (teacher scholarships, resource person cadres) for tribal or remote areas.

- Focused programs like Udaan Fellowship by ChildFund are supporting girls from disadvantaged backgrounds with financial aid, mentorship, and life skills to access higher education.

- The policy's strong emphasis on equity and inclusion helps civil society argue for differentiated attention—remedial teaching, special pedagogy, multilingual support.

Risks and gaps:

- In many places, the resources meant for marginalized groups remain underutilized due to capacity constraints.
- Without strong monitoring, wealthier or more advantaged localities absorb better supports, leaving remote areas behind.
- Social norms—around gender, disability, caste—continue to impede access, attendance, and retention more than policy.

- Adaptation of pedagogy to children with disabilities or multilingual backgrounds is still an emergent area; we lack scale models.

So the systems are responding, but much of the real transformation will depend on implementation fidelity and deliberate equity mechanisms.

4. Teachers are a cornerstone of the NEP vision. From your field experience, have there been noticeable shifts in teacher capacity, training, or empowerment?

What we see changing:

- Some states are rolling out professional development programs aligned to NEP, with modules on foundational literacy, child-centered pedagogy, and remedial strategies.
- Teachers in some districts are more open to peer observation, reflective practice, and use of formative assessments.

- Digital tools (for teacher support) like Diksha are being piloted in certain districts to support lesson planning, monitoring, and feedback loops.

What is still missing:

- Sustained mentoring and in-class support: many professional development programs remain workshop-based and disconnected from classroom realities.
- Career incentives and recognition: teacher progression, promotion, recognition remain weak, especially in remote zones.
- Local adaptation and ownership: training often remains “centralized” rather than responsive to local linguistics, cultural contexts, or school challenges.
- Infrastructure for practice: without libraries, teaching materials, leveled readers, or learning corners, teachers struggle to apply fresh methods.

Therefore, while the direction is promising, we must deepen support and bridge the theory-practice divide.

5. The pandemic accelerated digital learning tools; how can digital innovations be made more equitable and child-friendly in low-resource contexts?

Digital innovation is a double-edged sword. If done right, it can extend reach. If done poorly, it widens inequity.

Ways to make digital more equitable:

- Focus on offline or low-bandwidth solutions (preloaded tablets, local WiFi, shared device models).
- Use multilingual and multimodal content—audio, video, visuals—to help children who may struggle with reading.
- Build teacher capacity for digital pedagogy, not just hardware distribution.



- Partner with telecom providers to subsidize connectivity or zero-rate educational content.

- Public-private partnerships (PPP) can play a vital role by co-creating affordable solutions
- Integrate blended models: digital tools supplement—but do not replace—face-to-face support and small group remedial work.

ChildFund’s education work emphasizes responsive community support and low-tech learning enhancements even before pushing full digital. Our programs aim to combine local learning kits, community tutors, and technology where feasible, to ensure the digital leap helps rather than excludes.

6. Nearly one-third of India’s CSR funds go to education. Based on your experience, how can companies move from fragmented projects to partnerships aligned with NEP?

This is one of the biggest opportunities—and challenges—for systemic impact.

Here’s how CSR can scale impact:

- Long-term partnerships, not one-time grants: CSR should commit multi-year funding and institutional support, not just short pilot projects.
- Align with system priorities: Projects should be designed in sync with NEP goals (FLN, teacher capacity, inclusion), and ideally complement state/district plans rather than duplicate.
- Focus on scale and replication: Pilot successful models should be designed with scalability and adaptation across geographies.
- Invest in measurement and feedback loops: Use rigorous evaluation, learning, and adaptive adjustments rather than static deliverables.

From ChildFund's side, we often work with CSR partners to co-create scalable models—such as our PENCIL (Protective, Effective, N Context-based Initiation of Learning) program, STEM and Udaan Program—that build in local adaptability.

7. Could you highlight some flagship ChildFund initiatives that work toward strengthening NEP goals?

Certainly. A few of our key efforts are:

1. Early education and FLN support: Through our core education interventions we work with children 3 to 18 years, with a strong early-grade focus to build literacy and numeracy foundation along with social and emotional learning skills.

2. Udaan Fellowship: This program supports girls from underprivileged backgrounds with scholarships, mentorship, and life skills training—helping reduce dropout and open higher education access for girls.

3. STEM Education Program: In line with NEP's emphasis on equipping students with 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, and digital literacy, our STEM program introduces smart classrooms, mini science labs, coding labs and exposure visits, while promoting gender equity in STEM for students in grades 6–10.

4. Blended learning interventions: In select geographies, we are piloting low-tech digital tools, community-based tutoring, and remedial support to reinforce learning gaps.

5. Community and parent engagement: In many local geographies, we run reading campaigns, parent workshops, home learning kits, and local libraries to strengthen the learning environment beyond school walls.

6. Policy advocacy and partnerships: We work with state governments and educational bodies to share learning, co-develop tools, and scale promising approaches.

These initiatives are not just about delivery—they are about building evidence, learning, policy influence, and ultimately aligning with NEP's systemic intent.

8. What message would you offer to development practitioners, corporate donors, and policymakers seeking to transform education for the underserved?

If I may offer one core message: Don't chase innovations—build ecosystems.

It's tempting to pilot flashy tools, apps, or short-term programs. But transformation is about strengthening systems: capacitating teachers, aligning communities, building feedback loops, and ensuring equity from the margins inward.

To development practitioners: listen deeply to local contexts, co-create with communities, and build adaptive learning models.

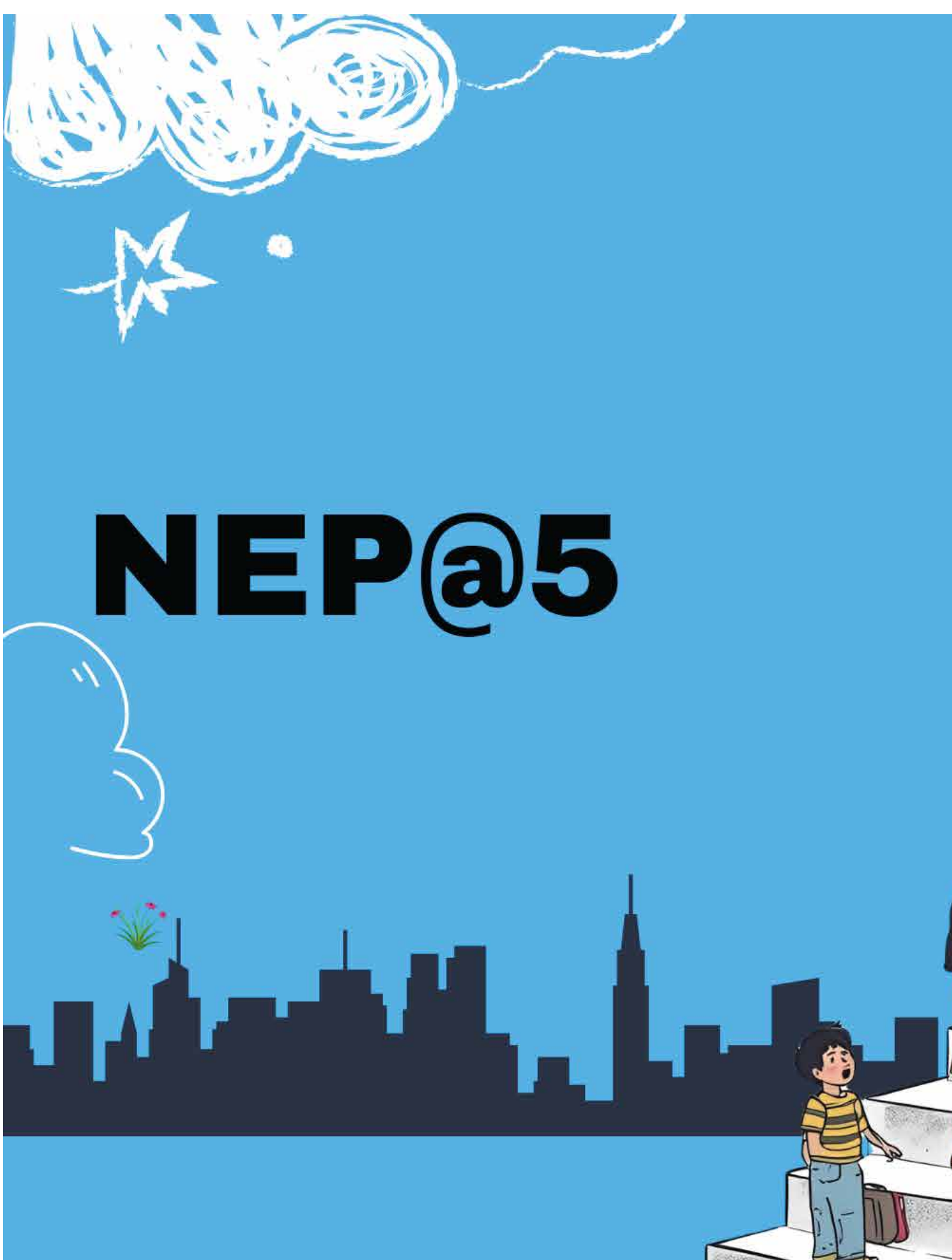
To corporate donors and CSR leaders: think multi-year, partner with credible NGOs and government, and invest in evaluation and scale—not just pilot projects.

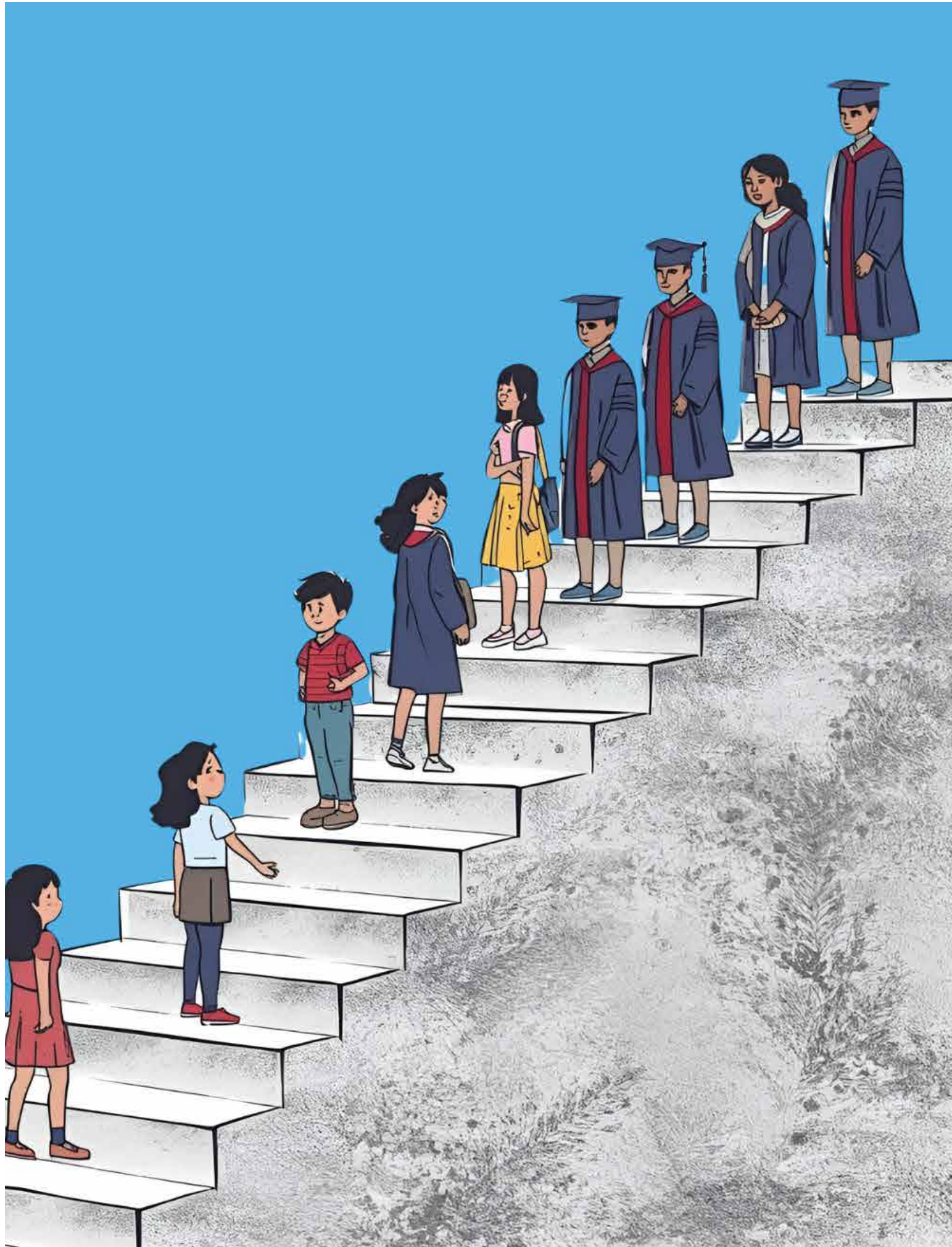
To policymakers: invest in teacher support as the backbone of reform, ensure data systems are real-time and usable, and protect inclusion as non-negotiable. The success of NEP will not be measured in documents—it will be judged in the learning gains of children who start off furthest behind.

Rajesh R. Singh is the Country Director – ChildFund International, (Child-focused international development org supporting children)



NEP@a5







Paresh Kumar



NEP@5

Why NEP 2020 Mattered

July 29, 2020. India announced its first education policy in 34 years. The last one was in 1986. A generation had passed. The world had changed. India's schools and universities had not.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 promised change. It was called “a historic moment” by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. He said, “This policy will prepare our youth to meet the challenges of the 21st century” (Speech, July 29, 2020).

The context mattered. By 2020, India had the largest youth population in the world. It was more than 356 million (estimated) between 10–24 years (UNFPA, 2020). Yet, learning outcomes were poor. The ASER 2018 survey found that only half of Grade 5 students could read a Grade 2 text. NEP 2020 promised to fix this. It aimed to transform the system from rote learning to critical thinking, from narrow silos to multidisciplinary learning, from access to equity and excellence. The Education Minister, Ramesh Pokhriyal Nishank, called it “the beginning of a new era” (Press briefing, July 2020).

His words echoed the ambition of the policy: reach every child, every teacher, every learner.

It aimed to transform the system from rote learning to critical thinking, from narrow silos to multidisciplinary learning, from access to equity and excellence.

The ambition was big. Universal access to quality education by 2030. 50% Gross Enrollment Ratio in higher education by 2035. Early childhood care and education for all. Technology in every classroom. But ambition also met reality. India's public spending on education hovered around 3% of GDP, far below the NEP target of 6% (Economic Survey, 2021). Experts warned of the gap between vision and resources. Still, for the first time in decades, there was hope. The policy spoke the language of aspiration. Of turning India's demographic dividend into human capital. Of preparing the next generation for a global economy.

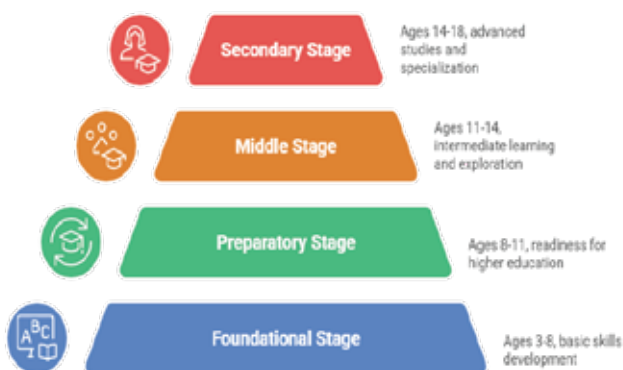
NEP 2020 mattered because it gave education a national spotlight. It reminded the country that learning is not just about jobs. It is about dignity. Opportunity. Nation-building.

Foundational Learning to Secondary Reforms

NEP 2020 begins with schools. The foundation of India's learning pyramid. The policy makes one thing clear: early years matter.

A new 5+3+3+4 structure replaced the old 10+2 system. The first five years cover foundational learning, ages 3–8. Pre-school plus Grades 1 and 2. This was a break from the past. For the first time, India formally recognized early childhood care and education (ECCE) as critical.

Educational Stage Pyramid



The Ministry of Education's own data says over 85% of brain development happens before age 6. Yet until 2020, ECCE was fragmented. Some through Anganwadis, some through private pre-schools. NEP sought to unify and strengthen this.

NEP 2020 put Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) at the heart of reforms. The goal: all children to achieve basic reading and numeracy skills by Grade 3 by 2025. The government launched NIPUN Bharat in July 2021



to operationalize this. The numbers justified urgency. ASER 2018 found that only 27% of Grade 3 children could read a Grade 2-level text (ASER, 2018). Without fixing this, later reforms would collapse. Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan reminded Parliament in July 2022: "NIPUN Bharat is not just a mission. It is a national movement."

Beyond foundations, NEP 2020 promised to reduce the curriculum load. More flexibility. More experiential learning. Less memorization. The focus shifted from "what to think" to "how to think."

Exams were to change too. Board exams redesigned to test core competencies, not rote recall. The proposal: modular exams twice a year, opportunities to improve scores. In June 2023, the Ministry said: "Board exams will become easier. Students will have the choice to appear in subjects when ready" (MoE Press Release, June 2023).

At the secondary level, NEP broke subject silos. No more "arts" vs "science." Students could mix mathematics with music, chemistry with entrepreneurship. The policy also promised multiple entry and exit options. Vocational education from Grade 6. Internships. Coding. Skills that connect classroom with the world of work.

Equity and Inclusion

NEP underlined access. Education for all, not just the privileged. The plan included gender inclusion funds and targeted support for socio-economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs). Yet, challenges remain. As per UDISE+ 2023–24, India still had a dropout rate of 8.2% at the secondary level (MoE, 2022). Implementation is uneven across states.

Technology in Schools

Digital was central. NEP foresaw a National Educational Technology Forum (NETF). It imagined tablets, digital content, online assessments. COVID-19 accelerated this. UNCEF 2022 data estimates, 75% urban vs. 45% rural access, with regards to student-specific online learning, indicating a roughly 30% gap.

At the secondary level, NEP broke subject silos. No more "arts" vs "science." Students could mix mathematics with music, chemistry with entrepreneurship.

A young boy in a school uniform is sitting on a yellow mat, smiling. In the background, there are school bags and a stack of books on the floor. The setting appears to be a school courtyard or a similar outdoor area with a building and a window in the background.

NEP 2020 gave schools new hope. Less burden, more joy. Less rote, more skills. As Union Minister Shri Dharmendra Pradhan highlights on Teachers' Day, September 5, 2025, the significance of the NEP 2020, describing it as central to India's journey towards self-reliance and development. He explains that teachers today are quickly embracing digital classrooms, AI, changing curricula and varied learning.

Restructuring Universities and Research Ecosystem

NEP 2020 did not stop at schools. It aimed to impact India's universities. The message was clear: higher education needs a reset. This is linked to the vision with India's aspiration of becoming a knowledge superpower.

India had more than 1,000 universities and 42,000 colleges (AISHE, 2019). Yet, global rankings told another story. In 2020, only three Indian institutions—IIT Bombay, IIT Delhi, IISc Bengaluru—were in the QS World's Top 200. The gap was glaring. India produced graduates in millions, but global recognition was thin. Research output lagged. Industry linkages were weak. NEP 2020 promised to change this.

The first big step: restructure the system. India had a fragmented setup. Standalone colleges. Affiliating universities with hundreds of weakly connected colleges. Technical institutions in silos. NEP 2020 proposed to create large multidisciplinary universities. The idea: no college would remain standalone. Every institution would become part of a larger university ecosystem.

The UGC explained in 2021: "Over the next 15 years, all higher education institutions will aim to become multidisciplinary, with teaching, research, and community engagement." This meant a small engineering college in Bihar or a women's college in Tamil Nadu would no longer float alone. They would merge into bigger, multidisciplinary clusters.

The policy set a bold target: 50% Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) in higher education by 2035 (NEP 2020). At the time, GER was only 26.3% (AISHE, 2018–19). Reaching 50% means doubling capacity in 15 years. More classrooms. More teachers. More digital access.



India's Prestigious Academic Institutions



IIT Bombay

Ranked 172, known for its significant academic standing

IISc Bengaluru

Ranked 185, recognized for excellence in research and education

IIT Delhi

Ranked 193, highlighting the competitive nature of these universities

Another sharp weakness: research. India spent only 0.7% of GDP on R&D in 2020 (UNESCO, 2020). Compare that to 3.5% in the US or 2.4% in China. The NEP called for a National Research Foundation (NRF). Its role: fund competitive research, support innovation, cut bureaucracy. When launching NRF in 2023, the government said: "The Foundation will seed, grow, and promote research culture across universities and colleges" (MoE press note, July 2023). The goal is to empower universities beyond IITs and IISc. Spread research culture across the country.

Rigid subject barriers were another target. NEP promised multiple entry and exit options in undergraduate programs. Students could leave after one year with a certificate, after two years with a diploma, or complete full degrees. UGC Chairperson M. Jagadesh Kumar

explained in 2022: "This will help students who face financial or personal difficulties. They can pause and return without losing progress." Multidisciplinary study was promoted. Engineering students could study economics. Arts students could take computer science. The aim: holistic graduates, not narrow specialists.

Technology runs through NEP's higher education reforms. The pandemic showed the urgency. The policy called for online degrees, blended learning, and a National Educational Technology Forum (NETF). By 2021, the government launched SWAYAM 2.0 and DIKSHA upgrades.

Yet challenges remained. The NSO Survey (2021) found that only 24% of Indian households had internet access at home. In rural India, it was just 15%. Digital equity remains the biggest barrier.

NEP wanted Indian universities to go global. It encouraged top 100 foreign universities to set up campuses in India. In February 2023, UGC released draft rules: foreign universities could set up fully owned campuses in India, design their own curricula, and hire international faculty. In a June 2024 speech at the inauguration of Nalanda University's new campus in Rajgir, Bihar, Modi emphasized, "We want to build such an education system in India that youngsters do not need to go abroad to study," and highlighted attracting international students to make India a global education hub.

We want to build such an education system in India that youngsters do not need to go abroad to study

The move is bold. But questions remain on affordability, regulation, and competition with Indian institutions.

NEP also sought to blur lines between vocational and professional education. The policy called for integrating skill-based courses into universities. AICTE began pushing coding, AI, and emerging technologies into engineering syllabi. Meanwhile, UGC emphasized internships and industry-linked projects.

This shift is crucial. India produces millions of graduates, but only about half of the youth were employable in 2023 (India Skills Report, Wheebox, 2023). Without alignment with jobs, degrees remain paper.

The vision is large. But challenges loom. Funding is the biggest. Without doubling investment, reforms may stall. Autonomy vs regulation is another debate. While NEP calls for autonomy for universities, India's regulatory bodies like UGC, AICTE, NCTE remain strong. The proposed Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) is still being designed. Implementation is uneven. Elite IITs move fast. Rural universities lag. Scholars warn of inequality.



Teacher Education and Capacity Building

No education reform works without teachers. Policies may inspire. Curricula may change. Technology may expand. But in the end, a child learns through a teacher. NEP 2020 acknowledged this truth. It declared teachers the “heart of the learning process.” It promised to empower them, not burden them.

PM Modi, on Teachers’ Day, September 5, 2025, said: “The dedication of teachers to nurturing minds is the foundation of a stronger and brighter future. Their commitment and compassion are note worthy.”

India, however, faces a crisis. Over 10 lakh teaching posts remain vacant across schools (MoE, 2022). Many rural schools have only one or two teachers for all grades. The 2018 ASER survey showed that in some states, multi-grade classrooms are the norm. A single teacher handles Grades 1–5 together. How can reforms succeed with such shortages? NEP 2020 recognized this gap. It called for urgent recruitment, better deployment, and continuous professional development.

The policy proposed National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPST) by 2022. This framework would define competencies, ethics, and expectations for teachers at every stage of their career. In 2021, the Ministry set up committees to draft NPST. The goal: a common language of professionalism across the system.

NEP 2020 made a bold move. By 2030, the minimum qualification for teachers will be a 4-year integrated B.Ed. degree. The aim: merge theory with practice, pedagogy with real classrooms.

Until now, teacher education was fragmented. Thousands of private B.Ed. colleges

churned out graduates of dubious quality. The Justice J.S. Verma Committee, specifically the High-Powered Commission on Teacher Education, was constituted by the Supreme Court of India in 2011 and submitted its report, titled Vision of Teacher Education

in India: Quality and Regulatory Perspective, in August 2012. The report notes that the rapid expansion of TEIs, particularly in the private sector between 1995 and 2000, led to a “sharp decline in the quality of teacher education programmes”. It also emphasizes the need for an overhaul of the teacher education system, including extending the duration of B.Ed.

programs to two years and introducing transparent pre-entry testing. NEP sought to end this. Only accredited, multidisciplinary universities would run teacher education programs. Fly-by-night B.Ed. shops would close.

NEP also emphasized learning for teachers. Not once, but throughout their careers. The policy proposed 50 hours of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) per year. Digital platforms like DIKSHA and NISHTHA are central. By 2022, NISHTHA had trained over 5 million teachers online (MoE, 2022). Still, challenges remain. Connectivity gaps limit rural teachers. Many complain of top-down, one-size-fits-all modules. True professional growth requires dialogue, mentorship, and contextual support.



Teachers often face micromanagement. From lesson plans to daily attendance, they are drowned in paperwork. NEP 2020 promised freedom. It said: teachers should focus on teaching, not clerical tasks. Schools should trust them to innovate.

Over 10 lakh teaching posts remain vacant across schools (MoE, 2022). Many rural schools have only one or two teachers for all grades. The 2018 ASER survey showed that in some states, multi-grade classrooms are the norm. A single teacher handles Grades 1–5 together.

The policy also expects teachers to shift pedagogy. From rote to inquiry. From chalk-and-talk to experiential. From exam coaching to competency. But are teachers trained for this? Some studies have found that only a miniscule proportion of classroom time is spent on

activities that promote critical thinking.

Most is still rote repetition. NEP’s success depends on retraining teachers for these shifts. Workshops, peer learning, and mentoring must be prioritized.

Financing and Implementation

Every reform need money. NEP 2020 is no exception. It sets ambitious targets. Universal access by 2030. Gross Enrollment Ratio of 50% in higher education by 2035. Teacher training. Digital infrastructure. Research funding. All of this costs. The policy itself admits this. It says: “The success of this policy depends on adequate and sustained investment in education.” But the numbers tell another story.

For decades, India has spent around 3% of GDP on education (Economic Survey, 2021). NEP 2020 calls for 6% of GDP. That is double. In Union Budget 2023–24, allocation for education was ₹1.12 lakh crore—just 2.9% of GDP (MoF, 2023). State budgets add more, but the gap remains wide.

At school level, infrastructure is still uneven.

As per the UDISE+ 2023-24 report:

- Internet Facilities: 53.9% of schools had internet access (7.92 lakh out of 14.71 lakh schools).
- Functional Computers: 57.2% of schools had functional computers (approximately 7.48 lakh schools with access to computers for teaching and learning).

The policy promises digital learning, flexible curriculum, and vocational integration. Without hardware, software, and connectivity, these remain paper plans. A 2021 NITI Aayog report, *Reimagining Education in India*, emphasizes the need for increased investment to achieve NEP 2020 goals, particularly for foundational literacy and numeracy, and highlights how underfunding exacerbates inequities in access and learning outcomes.

Universities face similar crunch. India spends much lesser than as compared to China and the US on higher education. The National Research Foundation (NRF) was designed to change this. With an outlay of ₹50,000 crore over five years, NRF promises to seed and support research across institutions.

Funding must be sustained. Sporadic grants won’t create long-term research ecosystems. Education is a concurrent subject in India’s Constitution. Both Union and States share responsibility. Implementation depends on cooperation. NEP 2020 requires states to revamp curricula, recruit teachers, strengthen early childhood care, set up digital platforms. This means state finances must expand too. But many states spend less than 3% of their GSDP on education. Kerala spends over 6%. Bihar spends less than 3%. The disparities are sharp. NEP 2020 recognizes the role of private sector. Nearly 40% of students in higher education are enrolled in private institutions (AISHE, 2019).

In some states, the share is over 60%. Private players bring capacity. But they also raise concerns of affordability and equity. The policy stresses “philanthropy, not profiteering.” It calls for more not-for-profit institutions. But without strict regulation, the line often blurs.

Vision is one thing. Execution is another.

- Teacher recruitment: With 10 lakh vacancies, reforms cannot wait. States must act fast.
- Training: Continuous professional development requires logistics, time, and money.
- Digital divide: NSO (2021) found that only 24% of households had internet access at home. In rural India, just 15%.
- Monitoring: The policy proposes independent State School Standards Authorities. But most states have not operationalized them.

NEP explicitly calls for philanthropic funding. India’s CSR spending crossed ₹30,000 crore in FY 2022–23 (MCA, 2023). Education received nearly one-third of this. Corporate partnerships with schools, skill centers, and universities are already visible. But experts warn of fragmentation. Without coordination, CSR funds scatter across projects without systemic impact.

To oversee implementation, NEP called for a National Education Commission, chaired by the Prime Minister. At state level, State Education Commissions. These bodies are yet to fully take shape. Meanwhile, UGC and AICTE continue regulating higher education.

The proposed Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) is still in draft stage. As of 2023, reforms remain in pilot phase. CBSE has introduced competency-based questions. Some states launched FLN programs. But national alignment is incomplete.

The promise is large. A new generation of learners, globally ready. A new set of universities, globally ranked. But the risk is also real. Without doubling budgets, recruiting teachers, bridging digital gaps, and ensuring equity, NEP 2020 may falter.

The Road Ahead

NEP 2020 was launched with hope. It promised to reset education after 34 years. Five years later, the record is mixed. Some steps forward. Many promises still on paper.

School reforms have begun. Foundational literacy missions launched. Board exams redesigned. Vocational education seeded. But dropout rates remain high. Teachers remain overburdened. Internet access in rural schools is still poor.

Higher education has seen bold moves. National Research Foundation announced. Draft guidelines for foreign universities published. Multidisciplinary education seeded in some IITs and central universities. Yet, gross enrollment ratio remains far from 50%. Funding gaps persist. Teacher education reforms have been announced. But vacancies remain over a million (MoE, 2022). Professional standards are still in draft stage.

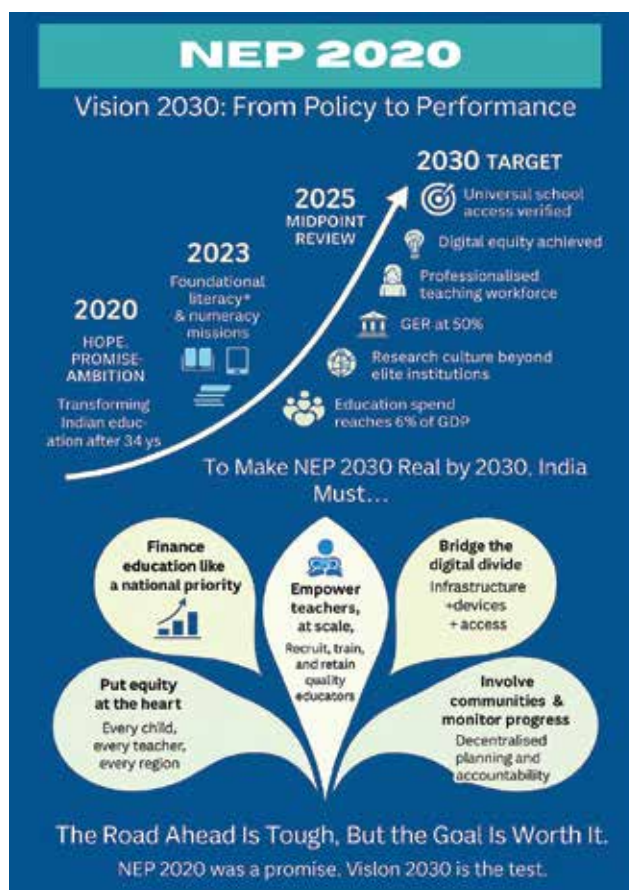
The biggest hurdle is money. NEP calls for 6% of GDP on education. India still spends less than 3%. Without doubling budgets, reforms risk stalling.

Lessons and Way Forward

NEP 2020 showed ambition. But ambition must meet capacity. India needs:

- Sustained financing, not short-term schemes.
- Teacher recruitment and training at scale.
- Digital equity to close rural-urban gaps.
- Research culture beyond elite institutions.
- Monitoring and accountability in states.

Equity must remain central. Otherwise, reforms risk deepening divides. As Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan said in July 2022: “This policy will succeed only when it reaches the last child.”



NEP @ 5 is not the end. It is a checkpoint. By 2030, India will know if universal school access is real. By 2035, it will know if GER has doubled. The stakes are high. India is the world's youngest nation. Their future rests on the system NEP 2020 seeks to create. If implemented well, NEP could turn the demographic dividend into human capital. If not, the dividend could become a burden.

Education is not just about skills or jobs. It is about dignity. Equity. Nation-building. NEP 2020 reminded India of this truth. The next five years will decide if India can move from promise to performance. From paper to classrooms. From vision to reality. The policy is ambitious. The journey is unfinished. The road ahead is tough. But the goal remains worth striving for.

Empowering Adolescent Health: How AI Chatbots Are Changing Sexual and Reproductive Health



Deepak Bhatt



Across the globe, millions of young people are navigating the rollercoaster of adolescence, including puberty, relationships, physical changes, and identity development. Yet when it comes to sexual and reproductive health (SRH), most of them remain in the shadows. Misinformation, cultural silence, and stigma often prevent them from asking questions or accessing credible information on SRH issues.

To bridge this gap, AI-powered chatbots are stepping in as friendly digital companions. They're available 24/7, ready to answer even the most awkward questions without judgment, and connect young people to reliable health information. For those working in social development, these tools are more than just tech; they're a quiet revolution, scalable, affordable, and powerful enough to reach millions of adolescents while breaking long-held taboos.

The Growing Need for Adolescent SRH Solutions

Adolescence isn't just another stage of life, it lays the foundation for future health and well-being. The choices made during these years can shape lifelong outcomes. Yet, when it comes to sexual and reproductive health (SRH), young people often face daunting barriers:

- **Silence at home and school:** Parents and teachers frequently avoid conversations about SRH.
- **Myths and misinformation:** Misconceptions about menstruation, contraception, and other issues continue to spread.
- **Stigma and fear:** In many cultures, simply asking a question about sexuality can lead to shame or punishment.
- **Lack of services:** Health clinics may be too far away, unwelcoming, or ill-equipped



to support adolescents., sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and increased vulnerability to exploitation.

Meanwhile, digitization has completely changed how young people search for knowledge. With smartphones in nearly every hand, adolescents now look to the internet for answers. But static websites and pamphlets feel outdated, and social media can be noisy, unreliable, or even unsafe. This is where AI chatbots come in. They meet adolescents where they already are on their phones, offering confidential conversations, interactive learning, and culturally relevant guidance in ways that feel natural and safe.

Across the world, AI chatbots are transforming how young people learn about sexual and reproductive health. From answering sensitive questions to offering

confidential guidance, these tools are making trusted information just a message away. Here are a few standout examples:

SnehAI (India): A Safe Space at Scale

India offers one of the most striking examples with SnehAI, developed by the Population Foundation of India. SnehAI is an Artificial Intelligence (AI) powered chatbot, housed on Facebook and WhatsApp Messenger. The chatbot provides a secure, personalised and non-judgemental space for young people to share concerns and learn about issues related to sexual and reproductive health as well as digital safety. SnehAI, built-in Hinglish (a mix of Hindi and English), uses storytelling, games and videos to engage users in conversations on a range of sexual and reproductive health issues like virginity, contraception, same-sex attraction, masturbation and safe

online behaviour.

- **The Challenge:** Despite 50% internet penetration, many adolescents, especially girls, remain exposed to online abuse, with little awareness of their rights. A 2023 survey revealed that while 87% of adolescents recognized online risks, only 39% knew the laws, and just 15% who experienced abuse reported it.

- **The Innovation:** Snehai creates a non-judgmental digital space where young people can interact anonymously with “Sneha”, a relatable avatar inspired by a popular TV drama character. The chatbot uses stories, quizzes, videos, GIFs, and myth-busting content, localized to Indian contexts. Over time, it has evolved from button-based interactions (Snehai 1.0) to natural language conversations (Snehai 2.0), expanding into online safety (Snehai 3.0) and WhatsApp integration.

- **The Impact:** In 2023 alone, Snehai engaged 150,000+ unique users, exchanging over 1.3 million messages. Repeat engagement was high: 80% of users returned. Most importantly, nearly 90% reported applying their new knowledge in real life.

88% of Snehai users said the chatbot was easy to use 9 in 10 could apply what they learned in daily life

AlexBot (Europe): Meeting Gen-Z on Their Terms

AlexBot is a private, confidential, and trustworthy chatbot that makes learning about sexual and reproductive health (SRH) as easy as chatting with a friend. The project aims to provide Gen-Z youth with accurate, relatable SRH information while countering misinformation and stereotypes. It also equips youth workers with the skills to effectively use and adapt the chatbot.

In Europe, AlexBot is breaking new ground by expanding SRH education across Belgium, Slovenia, Poland, and Hungary (2023–2025), adapting global standards to local contexts in multiple languages and cultures.

- **Interactive Learning:** AlexBot combines chat-based Q&As with infographics, explainer videos, and quizzes—engaging young people through different learning styles.

- **Support for Educators:** Beyond individual users, the chatbot provides youth workers with updated materials and structured lesson plans.

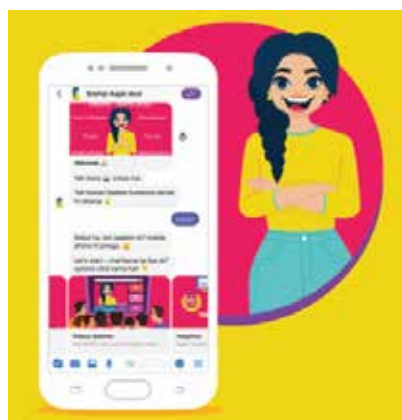
- **Cultural Sensitivity:** By offering confidential guidance in five languages, AlexBot reaches groups where stigma is strong or traditional sex education is lacking.

Young people report improved understanding of disease prevention, contraception, and relationships. For many, the confidential, always available chatbot feels like a safer starting point than a classroom or clinic.

Just Ask! (India): Scaling Privacy and Trust

UNFPA’s Just Ask! chatbot reflects another model, one rooted in privacy and ethical design. Its conversational AI covers menstruation, puberty, safe sex, consent, and rights, with responses tailored to individual concerns. Its purpose to provide young people with accurate, confidential, and stigma-free information on sexual and reproductive health. It creates a safe space where adolescents and youth can ask questions about puberty, relationships, contraception, gender, and more, without fear of judgment. Available in multiple languages, the chatbot helps dispel myths, tackle misinformation, and connect users to trusted health services and resources.

The focus on anonymity, accuracy, and emotional support makes it particularly valuable in India, where stigma still silences open discussions on SRH. By collaborating with local and international partners, UNFPA ensures the chatbot remains credible, trusted, and accessible. Till now, it has reached over 200,000 users across India, with 2.3 million+ conversations on critical topics around sexual and reproductive health and mental health.



How the Technology Works

Behind every friendly chatbot avatar lies some serious tech magic.

- **Natural Language Processing (NLP):** This lets chatbots understand questions, no matter how they're asked.
- **Machine Learning:** With every interaction, they get smarter, refining responses as more young people use them.
- **Expert Knowledge Bases:** Health professionals keep the content updated, so answers stay accurate and trustworthy.
- **Engaging Features:** Voice notes, GIFs, short videos, and local-language options make learning feel fun and relatable.

And here's the best part: these chatbots are never static. Through A/B testing, feedback loops, and constant updates, they adapt to new cultural realities and evolving adolescent needs, always staying one step ahead.

What Social Development Gains Are Emerging?

1. **Breaking Stigma** Chatbots provide safe, confidential spaces for adolescents to ask sensitive questions. This helps dismantle taboos and normalize conversations around sexuality, consent, and health.

2. **Scalable, Cost-Effective Outreach** Unlike physical clinics, chatbots scale rapidly, reaching rural and underserved populations at low cost. They also free up human health workers to focus on more complex cases.

3. **Inclusivity and Diversity** Projects like Amanda Selfie and AlexBot show how design choices—avatars, languages, and tone can ensure marginalized youth feel seen and supported.

4. **Evidence of Impact** From Snehai's repeat engagement rates to measurable knowledge gains in AlexBot, the data points to real-world impact.



Adolescents are not only learning but applying information to keep themselves safe.

Challenges We Must Confront

Despite the remarkable promise of AI chatbots, they also face significant challenges. One of the most pressing is ensuring accuracy and quality of information. Adolescents often come with complex or sensitive questions, and a chatbot must strike the right balance between empathy and scientific credibility. A single incorrect response could have serious consequences for a young person's health or decision-making. Another area of concern is privacy. Chatbots work by collecting data, and when the users are minors seeking confidential advice, the stakes are high. Protecting this data from misuse or breaches is non-negotiable, yet

regulations and safeguards are still catching up. The digital divide poses another hurdle. While mobile phones are widespread, not all young people have equal access to smartphones, internet connectivity, or the digital literacy required to use these tools effectively. This can unintentionally widen gaps between urban and rural youth, or between boys and girls. Finally, chatbots, no matter how advanced, cannot fully replace the human touch. Complex cases, experiences of abuse, or mental health crises require compassionate human intervention. Ensuring that chatbots are linked to referral systems, helplines, or trained counsellors is therefore crucial to avoid leaving young people unsupported in moments of real need. Trained counsellors is therefore crucial to avoid leaving young people unsupported in moments of real need.

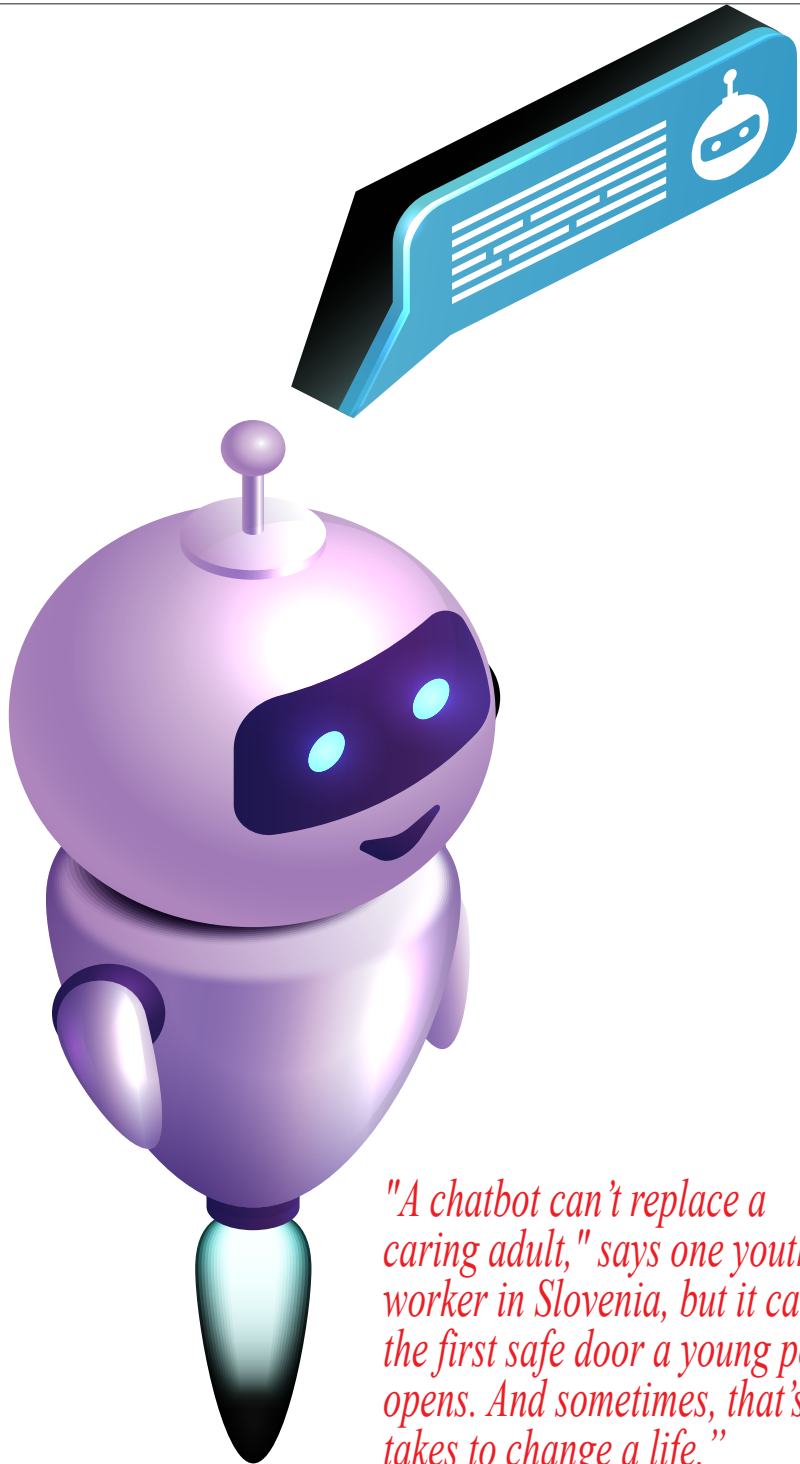
Lessons for Practitioners and Policymakers

Even with these challenges, important lessons are emerging for those designing and deploying chatbots in the social development space. First and foremost is the value of iterative design. Chatbots like Snehai and AlexBot demonstrate that success lies in constantly listening to young people, updating content, and refining features to keep pace with shifting cultures, technologies, and adolescent concerns. Another lesson is the importance of integration. A chatbot alone cannot carry the weight of behavior change, but when it is paired with mass media campaigns, school programs, or community outreach, its reach and credibility expand significantly.

Partnerships also stand out as a defining factor. No single organization can build, scale, and sustain such platforms alone. Collaboration between NGOs, governments, schools, and international agencies ensures both reach and long-term sustainability. Finally, there is the matter of ethics. Designing with privacy safeguards, transparency, and evidence-based responses is not just good practice—it is essential to earning trust among young users. Without these ethical foundations, even the most innovative chatbot risks being abandoned or mistrusted.

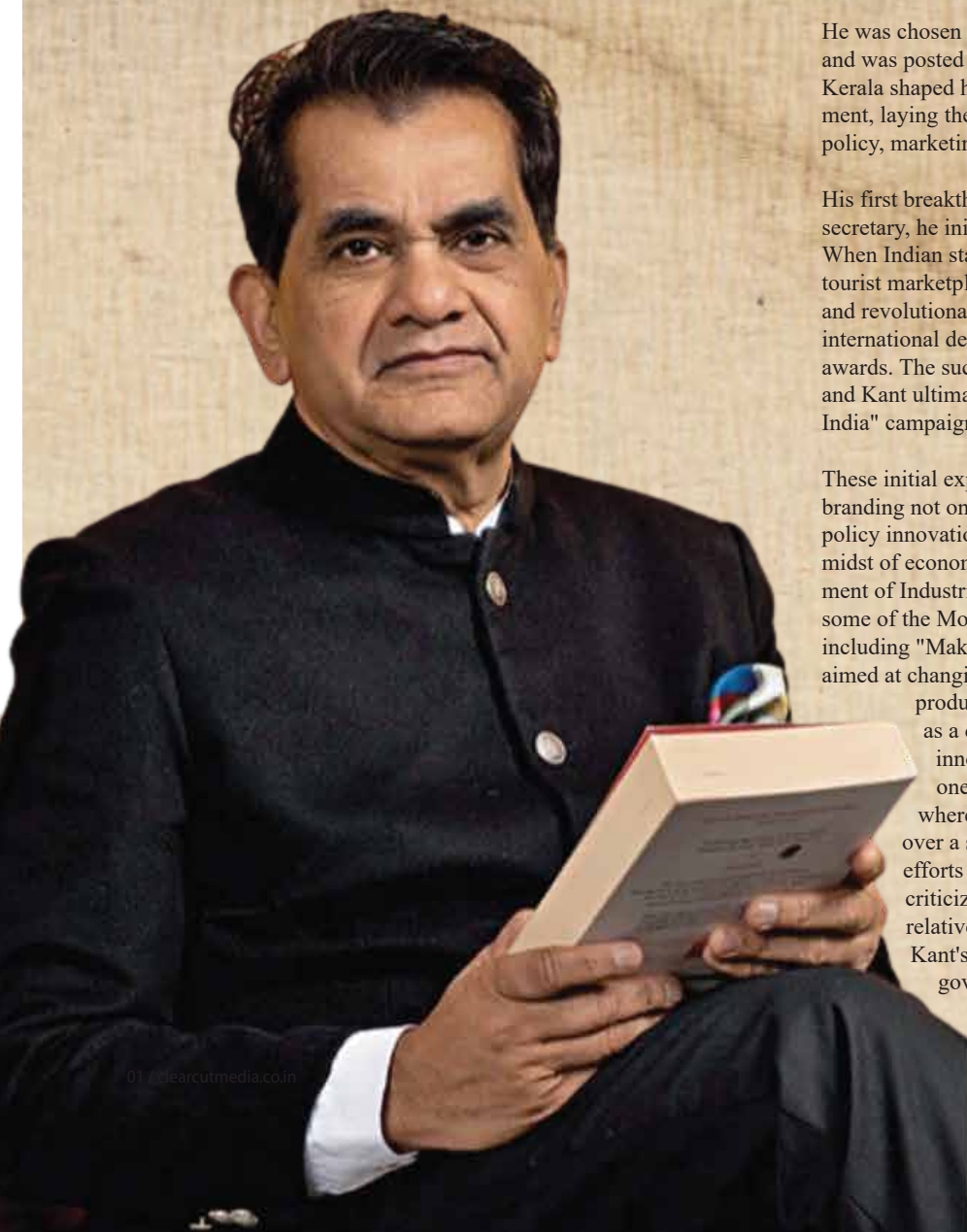
The Road Ahead

AI chatbots are still new in the world of adolescent SRH, but their potential is undeniable. They blend technology with empathy, reach with privacy, and scale with relatability. As digital literacy expands and taboos recede, these tools can empower a generation to make healthier, more informed choices. For funders, governments, and practitioners in social development, the takeaway is clear: investing in ethical, youth-centered digital solutions isn't just smart, it's transformative.



"A chatbot can't replace a caring adult," says one youth worker in Slovenia, but it can be the first safe door a young person opens. And sometimes, that's all it takes to change a life."

AMITABH KANT TALE OF A SHERPA



On a sweltering July afternoon in 2022, as India prepared to take over the G20 presidency, its newly appointed Sherpa, Amitabh Kant, stood at the center of New Delhi's diplomatic storm. For the seasoned bureaucrat, it was less an initiation than a continuation – another milestone in a career defined by ambitious programs, high-stakes negotiations, and an unshakable faith in India's ability to reinvent itself. In many ways, the G20 role was more than a diplomatic assignment; it was the culmination of decades of work that had made Kant a familiar presence in policy circles, corporate boardrooms, and television studios alike.

Kant's path is unconventional, even by the high standards of India's most distinguished civil servants. Born in 1956, he was educated at St. Stephen's College, Delhi, where he studied economics, and later earned a master's degree in international relations at Jawaharlal Nehru University.

He was chosen for the Indian Administrative Service in 1980 and was posted to the Kerala cadre. Those formative years in Kerala shaped his passion for tourism, branding, and development, laying the groundwork for a career that would combine policy, marketing, and strategic thinking.

His first breakthrough came when, as Kerala's tourism secretary, he initiated the "God's Own Country" campaign. When Indian states competed very little in the international tourist marketplace, the campaign was bold, visually striking, and revolutionary. It repositioned Kerala as a high-end international destination and subsequently won international awards. The success caught the Union government's attention, and Kant ultimately played a similar role in the "Incredible India" campaign.

These initial experiments demonstrated his ability to leverage branding not only for tourism but also as a broader tool of policy innovation. The relocation to Delhi placed Kant in the midst of economic policymaking. As Secretary of the Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion (DIPP), he initiated some of the Modi government's most prominent initiatives, including "Make in India" and "Startup India." Both were aimed at changing India's international image: the former as a production center rivalling East Asia, and the latter as a dynamic ecosystem of entrepreneurship and innovation. Concurrent with this, Kant championed reforms to Ease of Doing Business rankings, where India significantly improved its positioning over a span of years. The advocates attribute these efforts to attracting new investor interest, while others criticize the depth of reforms, which trends to be slow relative to branding. In any case, the efforts solidified Kant's position as a go-to reform architect for the government.

However, it was his elevation in 2016 as CEO of NITI Aayog, India's top policy think tank and successor to the Planning Commission, that provided Kant his longest and most significant innings. For more than six years, until June 2022, he held a singular position that was one of the most powerful voices in the government's development strategy. In NITI, Kant advocated governance through data, creating dashboards to monitor outcomes in health, education, and infrastructure. He also became the face of high-impact schemes such as the Aspirational Districts Programme, a mission that attacked India's most backward districts with intensive, measurable interventions.

Amitabh Kant was no longer merely a bureaucrat when he resigned from NITI Aayog to become India's G20 Sherpa. He was a brand unto himself — a technocrat, a salesman, and a strategist. Criticized and idolized in equal measure, his career is one that reflects the tension between ambitious policy imagination and the harsh realities of implementation.

Amitabh Kant's public service career spans more than four decades, and during this time, he has emerged as one of India's most influential voices in policy. An officer in the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) of the 1980 batch, Kerala cadre, Kant initially made his mark with tourism work and branding campaigns, including iconic campaigns such as "God's Own Country" for Kerala and "Incredible India", which helped place India firmly on the world's tourist map.

Leadership in NITI Aayog

Kant's tenure as CEO of NITI Aayog, from 2016 to 2022, was one of the most defining moments of his career. Under his leadership, several of the Indian government's flagship programs for structural reforms and inclusive development were navigated. The Aspirational Districts Programme (ADP), initiated in 2018, is widely regarded as one of the most effective one. Spanning 115 lagging districts, the program monitors 49 indicators in five key areas: health & nutrition, education, agriculture & water resources, financial inclusion & skill development, and basic infrastructure.

District collectors were skilled at refreshing the data to monitor in real time and hold individuals accountable. This evidence-based approach established a benchmark for governance frameworks in India.

Moving Economic Reforms

Another key policy action in his tenure was the National Monetisation Pipeline (NMP), formulated in consultation with ministries to monetize the value of government assets. The NMP envisioned a monetization potential of ₹6.0 lakh crore over four years (FY22-25), with roadways, railways, and power infrastructure comprising the majority of the assets. By FY25, monetization of highway assets alone had generated ₹1.42 lakh crore, evidencing the pipeline's expanding influence.

Vision for Atmanirbhar Bharat

Kant's work has also been directly linked to the government's vision of Atmanirbhar Bharat (Self-Reliant India).

He has been a driving force behind initiatives such as Make in India and Startup India, which aim to increase domestic manufacturing, attract investment attraction, and foster entrepreneurship. Through the encouragement and reduction of bureaucratic bottlenecks, these initiatives have established India as a startup and global investment hub.

Recognition and Ongoing Impact

Despite resigning as CEO of NITI Aayog, Kant continues to drive India's development agenda. He was appointed as an Independent Director of the Board of HCLTech, a leading Indian IT services company, on September 8, 2025. This appointment testifies to the private sector's appreciation of his impactful policy, governance, and strategic change expertise. When India assumed the presidency of the Group of Twenty (G20) in December 2022, it presented India to showcase its leadership on the global stage. Amitabh Kant, who was named India's G20 Sherpa in July 2022, was



POLICY CHAMPION / *Tale Of A Sherpa*

the face of this presidency, with the mandate to guide negotiations, set priorities, and forge consensus among the world's largest economies. For a year, he navigated the nexus of diplomacy, development, and strategy to ensure that India's G20 moment would have a lasting impact.

One of the most important fruits of his term was the successful adoption of the New Delhi Leaders' Declaration during the G20 Summit in September 2023. The New Delhi Leaders' Declaration was adopted at the 2023 G20 Summit, marking a consensus among member nations on key developmental and sustainability issues.

Kant has publicly defined this achievement as one that demonstrates India can be a bridge builder and peacemaker, bringing diverse voices together at the same table.

The joint statement transcended politics to talk of fundamental developmental concerns. It demonstrated resilience, balance, and growth, with a pledge to accelerate the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), reforms to multilateral institutions, and a green development compact aimed at addressing climate change. The themes resonated with Kant's enduring vision of inclusive development, digital revolution, and sustainability, linking India's domestic agenda to international concerns.

Another milestone in the Sherpa-ship of Kant was Prime Minister Modi's advocacy for the inclusion of the African Union as a permanent member of the G20. It was universally acclaimed as a move towards intensifying the voice of the Global South at the international level. Kant always emphasized that India's presidency was not merely a matter of national pride but about building a more balanced and representative framework of global governance.

Apart from the official negotiations, Kant also ensured that India's presidency left a lasting cultural and societal legacy. During his tenure, the G20 presidency evolved into a national event, with over 220 events held in 60 cities across the country. This strategy enabled all parts of India to participate in hosting international delegates while simultaneously supporting local culture and tourism.

Activities such as displaying One District One Product (ODOP) handicrafts and hosting cultural festivals highlighted the country's diversity, making the presidency a people's movement.

His term also furthered India's leadership in digital innovation. Kant underscored digital public infrastructure, fintech inclusion, and technology-led growth as responses not just for India, but also for other emerging economies. This emphasis ensured that India's successful models, such as Aadhaar, UPI, and CoWIN, were showcased to the world as scalable solutions, highlighting the country as an IT hub.

Amitabh Kant's tenure as Sherpa ended in June 2025. His stint as India's G20 Sherpa is best remembered as one of the most significant chapters of his career, which represents his diplomatic acumen as well as his single-minded commitment to inclusive growth and serves as an inspiration to our bureaucrats and leaders.



How Satyajit Ray's Cinematic Lens Brought A Change In Social Reforms Of India?



Kushagra Agarwal

For ages, cinema has been utilized as a source of entertainment but more importantly a source to inculcate a thought process, to ignite a perspective, to reveal the nuances. Cinema has used satire and great writing to display a mirror of society in its either past, present or future times. But, there are only a few who could write and direct everlasting cinema experience. One of them was proud of our nation, an Indian filmmaker, director, screenwriter, author, lyricist and much more, Mr. Satyajit Ray.

It would be an insolence to call Satyajit Ray just a filmmaker. The Indian man was quite a social reformer who wielded his camera like a pen and the screen as his canvas, vividly illustrating the complexities and the underlying layers of 20th-century Bengali and Indian society.

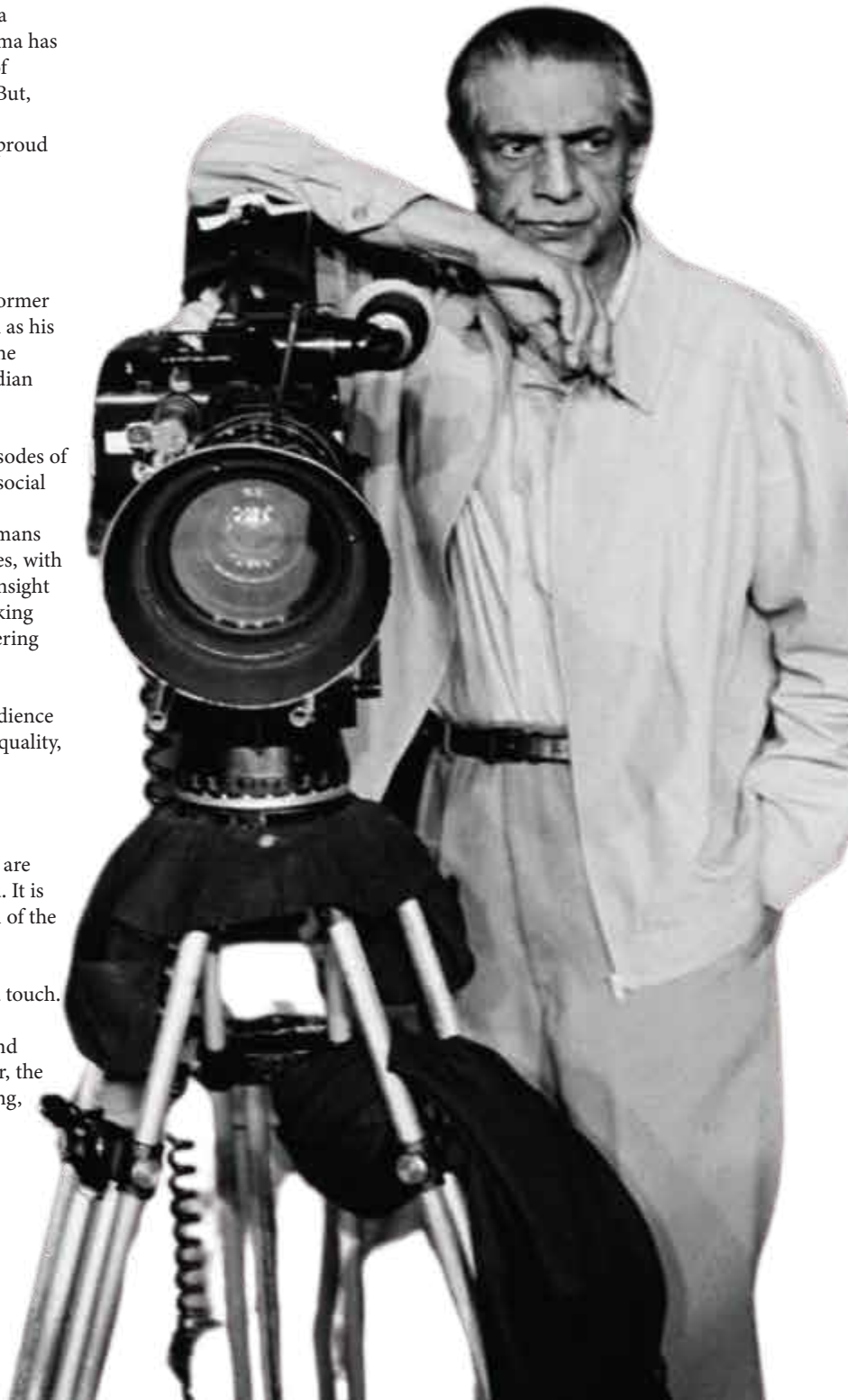
20th century India was going through a lot of episodes of ups and downs and his films served as profound social commentaries that aptly visualized the everyday struggles and dreams of the common people. Humans connect through emotions, experiences and senses, with a unique mix of humanism, realism, and a keen insight into societal intricacies, Ray transformed filmmaking into a potent instrument for change, all while steering clear of heavy-handed moralizing.

He held up a mirror to society, compelling his audience to face uncomfortable realities about poverty, inequality, and the essence of human dignity.

Seeing Society in Full Light

They say ambitious people born out of adversities are the ones who carry the power to change the world. It is clear that Satya was a careful observer and a pawn of the everyday struggles of 20th century India too. His brilliance shone through in his ability to depict deep-rooted societal issues with a gentle, nuanced touch.

In *Pather Panchali* (1955), this film revolves around children born in a poor family.. We feel the hunger, the small joys, the sorrow. Not as statistics, but as living,



breathing lives. In doing so, Ray made poverty something we didn't ignore anymore.

In *Mahanagar* (1963), he explores what happens when a middle-class housewife steps out of her traditional role and starts working. Respect, prejudice, aspiration, fear, all swirl together. The result is a portrait of a woman finding herself, and a society changing around her.

Films like *Seemabaddha* (1971) show how the corporate world, with its ambition and greed, affects human values. The middle class is becoming major, but its struggles are many, ambition, morals, compromises. Ray captured those tensions.

With *Pratidwandi* (1970), Ray captures another face of modern India: educated, restless youth caught between old values and new pressures. The search for identity, for work, for meaning. Stories that spoke to the changing India.

The Layers Of The Society:

Ray's critiques of society went far beyond the surface level. He really dug into the intricacies of modern life, taking a hard look at everything from corporate greed to the glitz of celebrity culture.

In his film *Seemabaddha* (1971), he unpacks the reality of a capitalist world and corporate structure. *Seemabaddha* showcased how the structure was designed where its employees were convinced to give up their dignity for a mere promotion. It's a subtle yet biting commentary on a system that rewards cutthroat behavior over integrity. They say that "At the top, it's always lonely", which is brilliantly portrayed by the film called *Nayak* (1966). *Nayak* presents a psychological portrait of a matinee idol, revealing the loneliness and insecurities that often hide behind the facade of fame.

Through this character, we clearly see the bigot and shallow nature of celebrity culture leading to isolating effects of being in the spotlight. India as a country has always ruled over, looted and enslaved for centuries.

Yet there aren't many of us who truly understand the aftermath of the situation. One of his most powerful political statements came in the form of the allegorical *Hirak Rajar Deshe* (1980) which uses satire to reveal the effects of authoritarianism.

Giving Empowerment & Showcasing Rationality

In the times of Ray, there were not many filmmakers and writers who could see women as more than a homemaker. Essentially couldn't walk past the prevailing patriarchy. Ray was a passionate champion of humanism and rationality, especially evident in how he portrayed women. Women like Arati in *Mahanagar* portrayed women in their entirety and were shown as active shapers of their own destinies.

His films were opposed or always watched with side eyes because it showed a perspective which shatters the conventional norms and beliefs which prevailed in the country in those times. Satya was a fan of the human mind and its possibilities. And through his films we can clearly observe that.

His films truly reflected his strong belief in the Enlightenment ideals of reason and individual freedom. He celebrated the incredible power of the human mind to question, think, and make choices. This passion for rationality and humanism struck a chord with reformist movements around the world, establishing him not just as a filmmaker but as a significant global thinker.

A Gentle But A Lasting Influence

Did Ray change laws? Perhaps not directly. But he changed how people see India, its flaws, its beauties, its possibilities. He helped start the Calcutta Film Society soon after Indian independence, which opened up Indian audiences to world cinema and inspired filmmakers. Ray was part of that push toward more thoughtful, artful cinema. His style, realism, humanism, subtle moral questioning, planted seeds for later filmmakers who dared to critique society, ask hard questions. His belief that art should respect its subjects,

not exploit poverty or suffering for sensationalism, set a standard.

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Closing Frame: Satyajit Ray's Cinematic Lens

Only those who choose to bring about a change can truly bring about a change. Satyajit Ray's socially aware storytelling has served as a model for filmmakers around the globe, demonstrating that cinema can be both a high art form and a powerful force for social change beyond just providing entertainment.

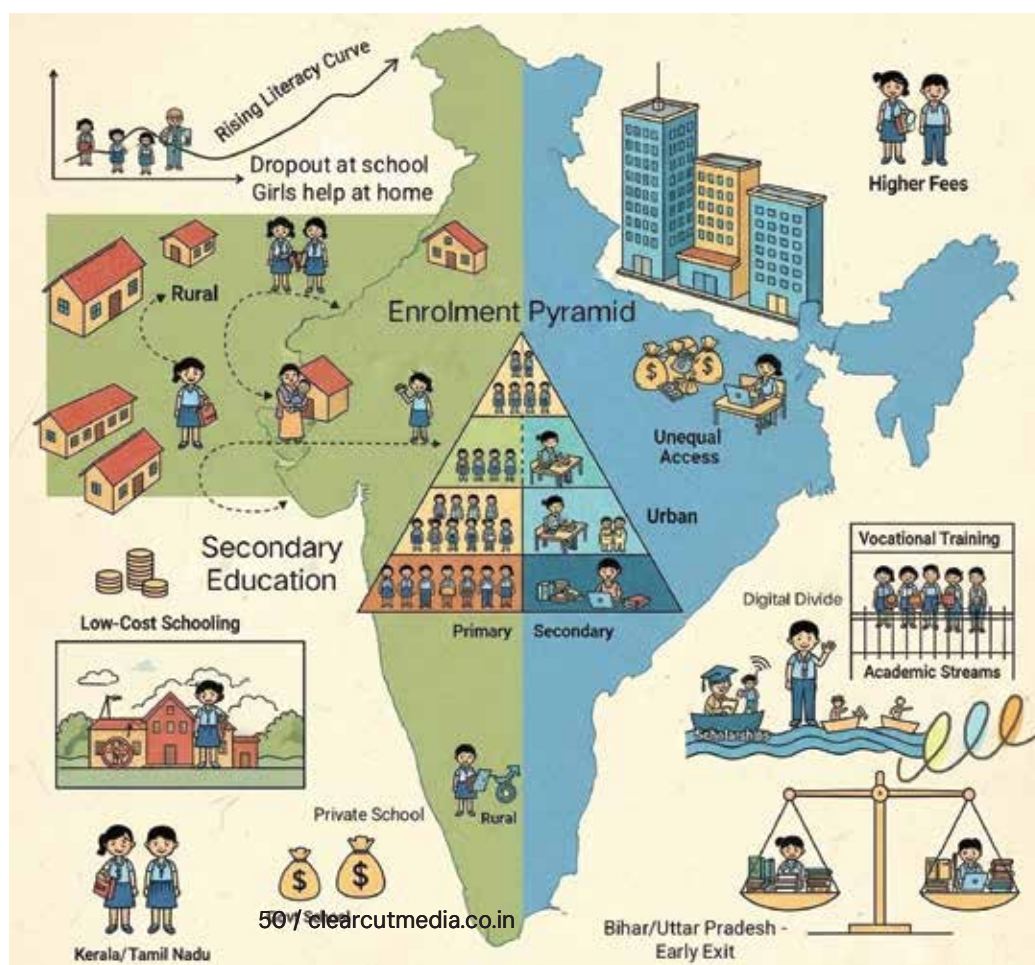
He showed that by concentrating on the local and the human experience, one can achieve universal significance. And we see this even today, with brands and products. Companies who cater to the local and regional audience first tend to grow faster than those who do not. His films remain a topic of study and conversation, offering timeless insights into the human experience.

As we still struggle with inequality, poverty, and prejudice, Satya's work is as relevant as ever, reminding us that art carries a profound responsibility to not only entertain but also to enlighten and inspire. He taught us that the most impactful stories are those that challenge the status quo and advocate for human dignity.



Antara Mrinal

India's Education Report Card: Insights from the Latest NSS Survey



Education in India has always been characterized by paradox and contradiction: tales of substantial growth, juxtaposed with serious inequality. The National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) was commissioned by the National Statistics Office (NSO) under the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) to conduct the Comprehensive Modular Survey: Education (CMS:E) from April - June 2025. It was a part of the 80th round of the National Sample Survey (NSS) and was developed to capture comparative information on the different facets of education in India such as enrolment, attendance, expenditure and access to educational inputs.

It provides new insights into this paradox, letting us know precisely where we have done well, where gaps remain, and where we need policy change and or intensification of attention. Data arrays in the NSS survey transform complicated realities into measurable realities through educational inputs. It provides new insights into this paradox, letting us know precisely where we have done well, where gaps remain, and where we need policy change and or intensification of attention. Data arrays in the NSS survey transform complicated realities into measurable realities through distinct tables and figures. Here, we consider these numbers in artisanal ways like stories based on variables.

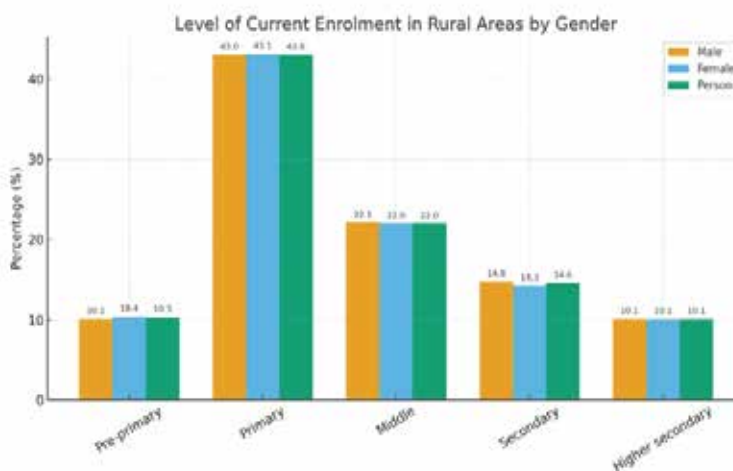
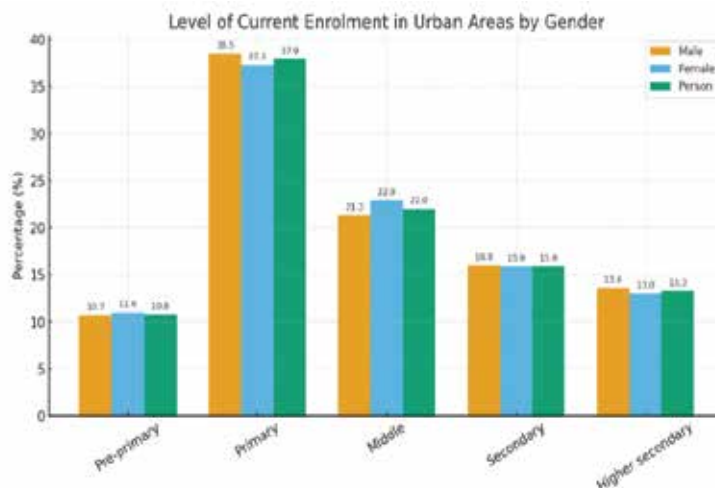
Literacy rates are increasing

NSS data show steady increases in literacy, with younger cohorts being nearly universally literate, while older cohorts make up a much smaller segment of the literate population. This is due to years of sustained campaigns, for example, the Right to Education Act, and decades of literacy interventions. At the same time, it remains the case that men are more likely to be literate, however, the gap has narrowed considerably in the last two decades. For example, while older (60 and above) women fall below 50% in terms of literacy rates, younger (15 - 24) women approach almost 90%.

While rural literacy rates are lower than urban literacy rates, the rural literacy curve is also sharper, suggesting they are catching up to the urban cohorts.

Current enrolment: Rural versus Urban

A fascinating table in the NSS makes a direct comparison of current enrolment for all educational levels, both urban and rural. At rural level, primary school outweighs, with 43% of enrolled students in primary. Middle school accounts for 22%, while secondary and higher secondary combined would represent about 25%. The number in pre-primary still accounts for a small 10%. In urban areas, the primary share is lower at 38%, but higher education stages have more value. For example, for urban students, 13% of urban students are already in higher secondary, compared to 10% for rural students. In rural India, the education pyramid is wider at base, most children land in primary school. Urban India stretches the pyramid higher since more students are extending into secondary and higher secondary.

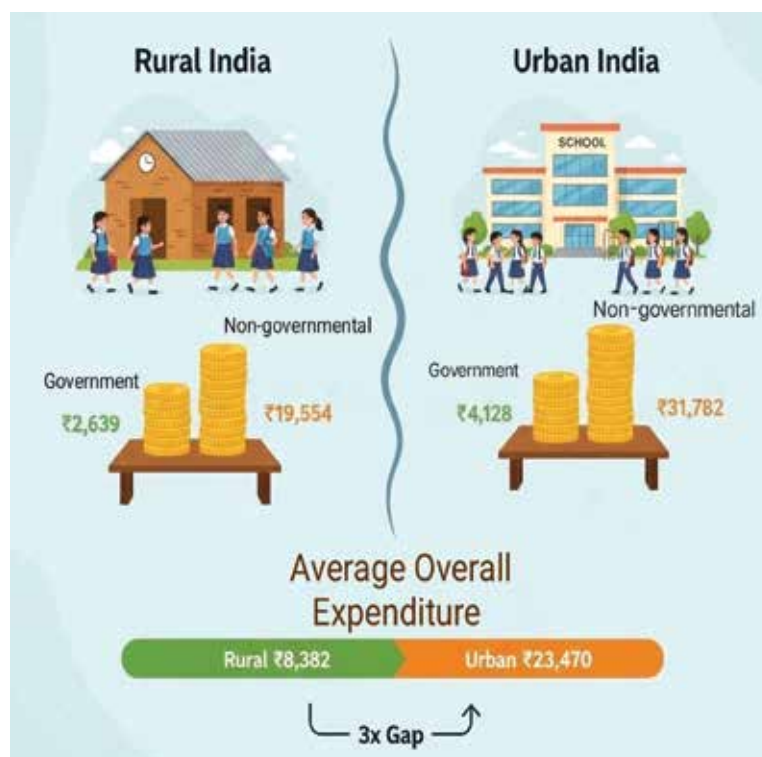


Expenditure on Education

In rural parts of India, the yearly average spending per student on school education was ₹2,639 in government schools and ₹19,554 in non-government schools in the current school year. This demonstrates how much more affordable government schools are for rural families than private schools, which create a considerable financial burden.

By comparison, in urban India, the average per-student cost of schooling was even greater. Spending was ₹4,128 for government schools and ₹31,782 for non-government schools. The costs in urban areas continued to illustrate that while government schools remain a more financially viable option, the expense of schooling was greater in urban areas because of additional fees, costs of the schools' infrastructure, and societies with higher living expenses. Finally, the rapid increase in costs for attending non-government schools, urban or rural, signals the commercialization of education and increasing inequality for families choosing a public versus a private school.

In rural India, the average expenditure per student for schooling across all enrolment levels and all types of schools was estimated to be ₹8,382 as compared to ₹23,470 in urban India. This discrepancy captures both the rural-urban difference in accessing resources and facilities and the difference in cost structures. In rural areas, educational spending is less as the school costs are relatively lower, there are fewer add-on costs, and there is little or no access to private schools. In urban centres, however, the spending is nearly triple that of rural areas, primarily based on higher tuition fees, add-on costs, transport charges, uniforms, books, and digital learning devices, as well as the higher prevalence of private schooling, where parents pay a premium for their children to attend a perceived private or better education.



One NSS table on course fees expenditure shows the inequality quite clearly. For the pre-primary group, roughly 46% of students (overall male + female average) paid course fees; by the secondary level, that jumped to 76% of students paying fees and at the higher secondary level almost 86% of students reported expenditure on fees.

There are also gender disparities: at the higher secondary level, 88.5% male students reported paying fees while 82.9% of female students reported paying fees, thus also showing gender differences in course fees.

As a student climbs the educational ladder, however, it gets more expensive. By the time a rural or urban child reaches Class XI, 90% of families are paying fees. For the very poor, this transition does not feel like climbing an educational ladder,

feels more like climbing an educational wall.

Dropout and Retention: Where We Are Losing Students

Dropout data is one of the most sobering elements of the survey. While enrolments are strong, retention falls off markedly after middle school. Concerning rural girls, the drop-out rates increase significantly after the age of 14, often due to home responsibilities, safety issues, and marriage. Urban locations may be better off, but dropout rates are known to rise between the transition of secondary school and higher secondary school.

Imagine 100 children enter Class I on the first day of school. By the time they reach Class X, in rural India, only about 60 of

those children are in school, fewer still will be in Class XII. In urban areas, that number may be closer to 75, but the cracks will remain.

Vocational and Technical Education: The Missing Component

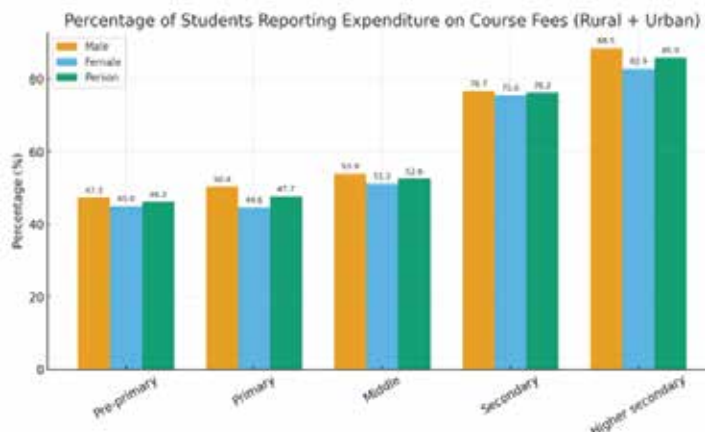
The NSS indicates a dismally low share of students taking vocational streams, particularly in rural India. Even as industries seek job-ready skills, very few children participate in vocational education. Rural boys are somewhat more likely than rural girls to access technical training, but overall shares are in the single digits. In urban areas, participation is marginally better, but overall enlistment is still below its global counterparts.

Of every 100 students in India, less than 10 are in vocational training. The remaining students are occupying academic streams that may or may not be aligned to employment states. The "skills gap" is not a meaningless phrase in a policy paper, it is literally captured in enrollment charts.

Digital Divide: Technology as a Division

The survey also emphasizes just how unpredictable the digital revolution is in education. Urban students are far more likely to report they have internet, laptops, and smartphones. Rural households, in particular those in the lowest income decile, report virtually no access. Female students report less access even in urban areas.

During the first instance of online learning during the pandemic, many children in urban areas accessed classes via tablets. In villages, however, many children missed several months, even years, simply accessing structured learning. The NSS numbers confirm this gap: technology has become the new fault line in educational inequality.



Regional Disparities: A Story of States

The importance of state level regressions demonstrate India's heterogeneous nature. Kerala and Tamil Nadu, have both high performance in the language proficiency and retention of students, which results in almost all students completing primary curriculum within these two states. Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, conversely, have both high rates of dropout, and low participation rates of girls in school. Secondary schooling is relatively high in the Northeast Indian states, but access to secondary schooling clearly shows disparity in outcomes. India is not one education system, but rather many education systems. A girl in Kerala will have a higher likelihood of finishing secondary school, than a boy in Bihar. Even the NSS data, presents human capital as a map, where education outcomes are based less on households and more on geography.

Scholarships and Support: A Very Thin Cushion

Only a small fraction of students actually benefited from receipt of a scholarship, even of those students eligible for support. Even still in rural areas there is ignorance of financial assistance schemes, where families often do not understand how the process works. In those areas, where scholarships are at least accessed, scholarships do contribute noticeably to retention. Scholarships are like life rafts,

everyone will drown, too few even know a raft exists, and there are more than too few available.

Numbers to stories

There is a general impression across the survey tables. While the rate of literacy is rising, the quality of education and inclusivity will need to be addressed. There is strong enrolment, but the number of dropouts masks progress. Costs are increasing, making higher education an option for many. Skills education is lacking leaving workers unprepared. Digital divides and regional disparities may reinforce inequalities.

The NSS does not only offer statistics as percentage; it presents the ongoing story of a nation on the move, but not in an even manner. For every measure of movement, there is a counter measure of exclusion.

Education as a National Project

The NSS education survey reminds us that data is not dead - it is infused with the lived realities of millions. Every statistic regarding enrolment, or funding, is reflective of a family's struggle, a child's hope, or a dropout's heartache. India's way forward will need to operationalize those statistics: expand access to secondary education; reduce cost; strengthen vocational pathways; bridge digital divides - and only then will the 'India growth story' have a foundation built upon universal, equitable education.

NIRF 2025: India's Academic Elite

The launch of National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) 2025 for the fourth time in a row, by the Ministry of Education brought higher education back into focus in our country. But while this latest release of rankings, particularly in the "Overall" category, serves to enlighten students and their families, it also raises questions for those promoting a national conversation about research, funding, and equity.

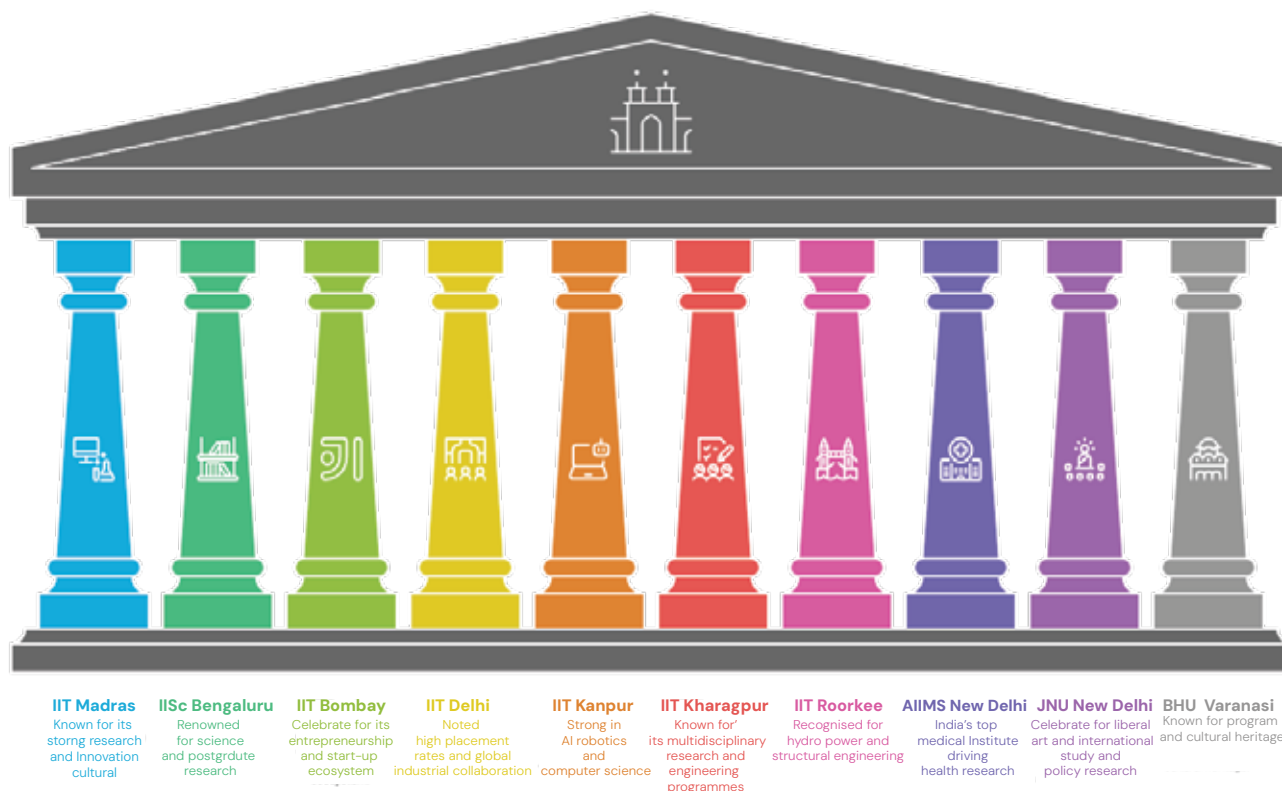
What is the Basis & Criteria of "Overall" Ranking? The NIRF "Overall" ranking amalgamates various aspects of institutional performance.

To generate these rankings, the institutions are evaluated with respect to five major criteria:

- Teaching, Learning & Resources (TLR) – infrastructure, faculty/student ratio, lab facilities, library resources.
 - Research & Professional Practice (RPC) – quantity and quality of research papers published, number of patents filed, collaborations with industry, etc.
- weightings and these are normalized (to a 100 point scale). The weighted average then determines an institute's ranking as the final score.



Top Ten Institutions



Trends and changes for 2025

The rankings recorded in 2025 show that the IITs and IISc continue to be powerhouses, comprising seven of the ten highest-scoring institutions. Their positions appear strongly justified and are on the backs of a decades-long commitment from the government and utility of built research infrastructure into educational leadership. The ranking metrics highlight the growing relevance of medical sciences (in the form of AIIMS), liberal arts (with JNU), and multidisciplinary education (BHU), with all three institutions in the top 10. Interestingly, private institutions, such as Manipal Academy of Higher Education (MAHE) and some of the others, have seen a huge increase

relative to their own institutional peers that reflect possibilities for private investments in advancing the landscape of higher education.

Future Pathways

While NIRF is well-respected, there are detractors. The pervasive emphasis on research output and perception tends to privilege the old-school, established university that also has a long, storied history. Upstart universities that might be exemplary in terms of student support, student and faculty inclusivity, and the quality of teaching, cannot move up the ranks as quickly. Moreover, as issues such as mental health, safety in hostels and apartments, and general well-being do not have any representative measures in the current rankings.

have any representative measures in the current rankings. have any representative measures in the current rankings. These would represent a more concerted effort toward aligning India's ranking system closer to global ranking systems, such as the QS World University Rankings or Times Higher Education (THE).

The NIRW 2025 Top 10 list reflects the pride of existing academic behemoths in India, yet remains a pathway for the whole system's next destination. For students: rankings are the barometer of futures, but still one of many tools to inform their future direction. For policymakers: an opportunity to expand the reach of excellence beyond IITs and AIIMS; so that, India's many millions of students are assured the opportunity for quality; on their terms; and at their site of study.

SONU SOOD

A Lesson in Philanthropy

Early in 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic gripped India, migrant laborers were suddenly left stranded in urban areas, unemployed and hopeless. Daily wagers, factory workers, and their families went hungry, homeless, and without transport after the lockdown was imposed across the country. Pictures of men, women, and even children covering hundreds of kilometers on highways spoke of the nation's helplessness. In the face of this crisis, one unlikely hero was to emerge not from politics or policy, but from the film industry. Bollywood actor Sonu Sood came forward, initially unobtrusively, then with a might that would be transformative and that would give rise to a movement.

Sood started by organizing buses for stranded laborers in Maharashtra back to their hometowns. What began as a few buses soon turned into a large-scale operation in several states. In a matter of weeks, he had helped transport more than 7.5 lakh migrants to their villages, organizing with local governments and covering much of the expense himself. For many families, these trips were a matter of survival, a family reunion, and the possibility of beginning again with dignity.

But his work did not end with transportation. Sensing the urgent requirement of food security, Sonu Sood organized several ration distribution drives in slum areas and low-income communities. From meals to dry ration kits, his team did not leave the people at the bottom rung of society hungry. In many cities, he visited the areas personally to monitor the distribution, frequently meeting people, hearing their woes, and calving them with compassion. Word spread like wildfire, and thousands of needy citizens started contacting him through social media handles. His Twitter account became a sort of helpline, with messages flooding in for oxygen cylinders, hospital beds, medicines, and even scholarship support. What distinguished him was not so much the extent of his response but the human touch his responses came in minutes, and requests were fulfilled with a sense of urgency. The effect of these efforts was compounded by the manner in which they tapped into people's emotions. Sood's interventions were not presented as charity but as solidarity. He would regularly call the people he assisted "family,"

emphasizing once again the perception that his motive was not publicity but true compassion. On occasion, in interviews, he would insist compulsively that he was simply doing what any human would do when faced with other people's suffering. By the end of 2020, Sonu Sood was a household name equal to humanitarianism. Many state governments, such as Punjab and Andhra Pradesh, awarded him prizes and titles for his work.

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By the end of 2020, Sonu Sood was a household name equal to humanitarianism. Many state governments, such as Punjab and Andhra Pradesh, awarded him prizes and titles for his work. He became known as the "Messiah of Migrants" and was the topic of documentaries, books, and multiple news articles. Most notably, his work reimagined the concept of being a celebrity in India as demonstrating that power, when coupled with compassion, could be a formidable force of social transformation.

This initial chapter of his philanthropy set the stage for what was to follow. What started as a response to crisis would soon become systematic programs in education, healthcare, and livelihood—leaving behind a legacy of empathy that went well beyond the pandemic.

Having gained national acclaim during the pandemic, Sonu Sood deliberately shifted his philanthropic efforts towards multiple fields. He understood that though timely relief was crucial to save lives, infrastructural support towards education, healthcare, and employment could change lives in despair. This was the start of a more structured and sustainable model of his philanthropy.

Education for All: "Sood Charity Foundation"

Education is one of the greatest pillars of human life and also Sood's charitable activities. In 2020, he started the Sood Charity Foundation, which offers scholarships and grants to poor students. His project, "Sambhavam," provides free coaching for UPSC aspirants, which allows young people from poor backgrounds to get themselves ready for one of India's most challenging competitive exams. The initiative does not only offer money but also opportunities for mentorship, study materials, and personality development classes.

Outside UPSC, the institution operates niche scholarship schemes like • Professor Saroj Sood Scholarships (in honor of his late mother) for higher education.

• Fee support as well as institutional tie-ups to fund medical education aspirants.

• Aid to students in schools who could not pay the tuition fees during the pandemic. These education efforts solved a crucial problem in India, where, as per the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), limited funds are among the most important reasons for dropping out. By filling this gap, Sood provided opportunities for thousands of students to have bigger dreams.

Life-Saving Interventions in Healthcare

Along with education, healthcare also emerged as a second pillar of Sonu Sood's philanthropic activities. The pandemic had exposed issues such as insufficient hospital infrastructures, oxygen shortages, and costly treatments that left citizens across the country

exposed and drained. Sood filled the gaps through interventions such as 1) Free Medical Camps: With the help of his foundation, he conducted free health check-ups and health camps in rural and semi-urban regions where they were needed the most.

2) Critical Care Support: He gave financial assistance for surgeries,

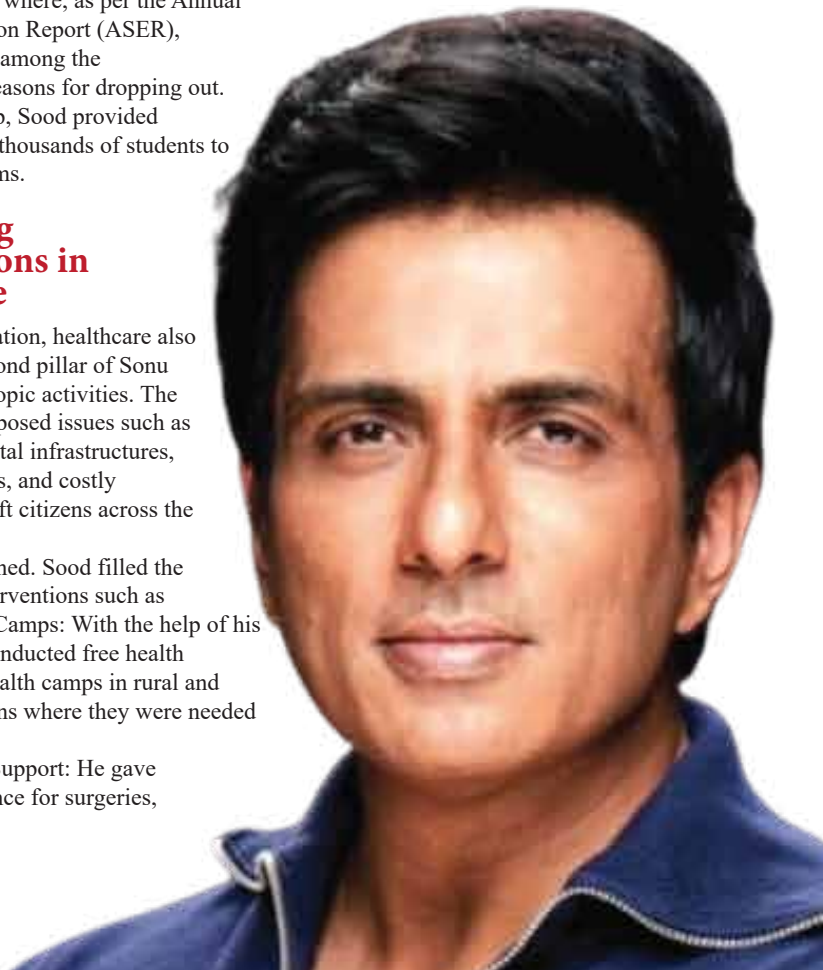
cancer treatment, and organ transplants for those in need but couldn't pay for it.

3) Oxygen and Medicines: During the second wave of COVID-19 in 2021, he arranged thousands of oxygen cylinders and concentrators, which were very crucial in collaboration with local NGOs and international donors.

One of the famous cases included establishing an oxygen plant within a hospital in Andhra Pradesh. This was not a single donation but reflected his transition towards sustainable solutions for healthcare.

Employment and Skill Development

Realizing that one of the largest side effects of the pandemic was job loss, Sood collaborated with businesses to generate employment opportunities. He started programs to match job candidates with employers throughout India. In partnership with education platforms, he also advocated for skill development training so that not only were the youth employed but also groomed to advance in their careers well after the pandemic.



The Larger Vision

By these interventions, Sonu Sood shifted from a crisis manager to a nation-builder. His initiatives represented a fusion of charity and empowerment and gave instant relief and solved causes of poverty and inequality at the same time. Notably, he practiced transparency, frequently sharing news about the recipients of his initiatives, which instilled public confidence in his work.

This second phase of his philanthropic journey saw a definite pattern emerging: Sood was not only responding to emergencies but striving to create a safety net where one did not exist. Education, healthcare, and livelihood were the three pillars of his vision, which set the stage for his role in lasting social change.

Technology and Grassroots Change

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Expanding Beyond India

Strangely, Sonu Sood's impact also started going beyond borders. There were reports of his help reaching students overseas, especially in nations such as the Philippines and Kyrgyzstan, where he organized medical education assistance for Indian students. The global volunteering outreach further polished his status as an international humanitarian with grassroots origins.

The Grassroots Hero

By now, Sonu Sood had transformed from being regarded as a "reel-life hero" to being known as a grassroots nation-builder. His activity in employment, entrepreneurship, women's empowerment, and rural development showed us one fundamental: real change happens when individuals are empowered to stand on their own feet.



Clear Cut Magazine Makes Powerful Debut at Jaishankar Memorial Centre Where Children Take the Lead in Launching New Social Impact Publication



New Delhi. August 27, 2025 – Breaking away from the tradition of celebrity-driven launches, the inaugural issue of Clear Cut Magazine, an independent print and digital publication dedicated to India's social development sector, was unveiled today at the Jaishankar Memorial Centre (JMC), New Delhi. What made the moment truly special was that the magazine was launched not by public figures, but by the children of JMC themselves, a powerful reminder that the future of India's social impact lies in the hands of its youth and its most marginalized voices.

The event brought together Vidya Raghwan and Raghwan Srinivasan from the JMC Managing Team, along with staff, well-wishers, and most importantly,

the children from economically weaker sections, who are at the very heart of the Centre's transformative work.

Speaking at the launch, Vidya Raghwan praised the initiative and shared her reflections: "Clear Cut Magazine could not have chosen a more meaningful way to begin its journey - by placing children, the true future of our nation, at the very heart of this celebration. This moment captures the spirit of both JMC and the magazine: an India where social impact is not just an aspiration, but a lived reality."

Pareesh Kumar, Managing Editor of Clear Cut Magazine, expressed heartfelt gratitude to JMC for hosting the launch: "It was truly an honor to release our

first issue at such an inspiring institution. We were moved by the warmth of the JMC community and humbled to witness their extraordinary work in nurturing and empowering young lives. Having the children lead this launch was more than symbolic; it perfectly reflected our mission and the values we hope to carry forward." Kumar went on to highlight the deep sense of shared vision between the two organizations: "The mission to honor Jaishankar's legacy by driving social change through education and community development resonates deeply with us. At Clear Cut, we believe in the power of stories to spark real action, and the stories being lived and written every single day at JMC are among the most powerful we've ever encountered."



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About Clear Cut Magazine

Clear Cut is an independent print and digital magazine created by professionals from India’s social development sector. It was born out of a simple but urgent desire - to move beyond surface-level stories and shine a light on the voices and issues that are too often overlooked. At its heart, the magazine is a space for voices that speak with clarity, empathy, and conviction, bringing honesty and depth to conversations about social change.

woven around a central theme bringing, - together fresh perspectives from researchers, practitioners, storytellers, and people with lived experiences. The magazine opens up conversations on some of the most pressing issues of our time. From mental health and gender equity to grassroots leadership, and written every single day at JMC are agovernance, and climate justice, it creates a platform where real stories and real voices come together to shape understanding and inspire change.

With its commitment to “slow journalism”, storytelling that is thoughtful, inclusive, and rooted in purpose, Clear Cut aims to spark meaningful conversations, bringing grassroots voices to the forefront, and help readers engage more deeply with the many layers of India’s social realities. By placing the launch in the hands of children at JMC, Clear Cut Magazine sent out a powerful message: the future of India’s social development rests with As Paresk Kumar summed it

up: “We believe real change begins with clear and courageous conversations. With Clear Cut, our hope is to build a platform that doesn’t just inform, but also inspires; lifting up the voices that are shaping a more just and compassionate India.”

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A Symbolic Beginning

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Bhutan: A lesson in symbolic sustainability



When Bhutan celebrated the birth of its crown prince by planting 108,000 trees, it was more than paying tribute to a royal child. It was testament to the world what is truly important in an era marked by ecological disaster. In a world where fireworks, military parades, and marble monuments tend to greet new heirs, Bhutan's was low-key yet deep, earthbound, community-rooted, and expressive of a country whose existence is defined by its forests.

The meaning of the number itself was not an accident. For Buddhists, the number 108 holds profound religious significance, symbolizing purity from defilements and the completeness of life. The addition of three zeros amplified this energy, rendering it both reverent and

benevolent in nature. Residents throughout the kingdom planted 82,000 of these trees, while officials and volunteers, including the Prime Minister and opposition members, planted another 26,000. The species was adapted according to local ecology, from oak to pine to teak, to ensure that the new trees would flourish where they were planted. "To tend these saplings is like to tend the prince himself," one of the organizers said, reminding all that love of the earth is not distinguishable from love of the future generation.

This gesture would have been strictly ceremonial if it were not in line with Bhutan's age-old philosophy of protecting the environment. The nation is the globe's sole carbon-negative

country. Its forests blanket nearly 70 percent of its territory and sequester six million tons of carbon dioxide annually, and Bhutan only releases around 1.5 million tons. Its constitution dictates that the nation must have at least 60 percent of its area in perpetuity under forest cover. Hydropower from its mountain streams provides clean electricity to the country and for export, with low emissions, facilitating economic growth. These are not catchphrases but facts that have enabled a tiny Himalayan kingdom to achieve what much larger and richer countries have not been able to do.

Tree planting for the prince was thus more than rhetoric; it was tradition. It expressed a national culture in which

environmental preservation was not a nicety to be added on but a founding pillar of identity and policy. While it is currently a time when deforestation is rife across much of the globe, the people of Bhutan have organized to sow new life, linking a royal festival to a communal act of regeneration. It was as much a civic as a religious ceremony. Trees are venerated by Buddhism as representation of compassion and life. The "Tendrel" ritual, performed alongside the planting, was laced with prayers and blessings, placing ecological responsibility within the context of cultural significance.

Symbolism has not been sufficient for the government. In 2023, Bhutan initiated the Bhutan Climate Fund at COP28, which is geared to aggregate its net negative emissions into an open system that can be sold as carbon credits. This step acknowledges that, although Bhutan's commitment is cultural and moral, it must also be financially sustainable in today's world. A national carbon registry and transparent terms of market participation have been put in place to guarantee performance and forest management policies under the REDD+ scheme keep conservation in balance with rural livelihoods.

What is significant about Bhutan's model is not only that it has laws, rituals, and funds in place, but that they are harmonious with each other. Cultural identity supports legal prescriptions; government policy is mirrored in community action; economic planning respects ecological boundaries. When Bhutan plants trees for a prince, it is not a token because the day-to-day reality of the country lends it substance.

The world, however, tends to slip into a gap between the promise and practice. Countries make commitment to being carbon neutral by 2050 but go ahead to authorize new coal plants. Governments initiate massive tree-planting campaigns which result in saplings drying out without water after a year. Against this, Bhutan's action finds credibility because

it seems to be part of an ideology that delivers. Its forests are not a stage prop but a living reality; its carbon negativity is not aspirational but measurable. What can other countries learn from this? Not that all monarchical states need to commemorate royal births with saplings, but that celebration and milestone can be attached to values that last. Fireworks fade; marble memorials erode; but trees grow, take up carbon, provide habitation for wildlife, and give shade to generations to come. Sowing 108,000 of them is a reminder that legacy is not quantifiable in stone or metal but in life that lasts longer than the banners come down.

Bhutan's royal tree planting can be easily dismissed as a charming, a tiny Himalayan kingdom making a symbolic gesture. However, in a desperate world looking for models of integrity in climate policy, it is not just charming - it is worthy of emulation. If a country of fewer than a million people, resource-poor and landlocked, can stay carbon-negative while linking cultural pride to environmental stewardship, then excuses elsewhere sound hollow. Birth of a prince was the event, but beneath the celebration was life itself - life breathing, growing, grounding a delicate planet.



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