



The Out-of-School Child: Understanding Educational Exclusion in India

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The article argues that school dropout in India is not an individual failure but the outcome of systemic and structural exclusion. Children who leave school often continue to value education and hope for a second chance. However, the absence of a comprehensive second-chance education policy—including bridge courses for age-appropriate lateral entry, residential facilities, and other supportive interventions—leaves them permanently excluded from education, and force them into labour.

Exclusion operates through several mechanisms: denial of admission due to missing documents, digital governance systems that disadvantage poor and migrant families, discriminatory school cultures, inadequate teaching, and lack of support for first-generation learners. Recent reforms such as school consolidation, teacher shortages, and the expansion of private education have created additional barriers. Privatisation ties educational continuity to a family's ability to pay, thereby deepening social and economic inequality.

The article argues that India's challenge is not merely a learning crisis but, more fundamentally, a crisis of educational justice.

Ensuring uninterrupted, inclusive, and dignified education for every child requires stronger public institutions, greater State responsibility, and recognition of education as a fundamental right from early childhood through secondary school.

The out of school child

Today's children understand the value of education. When they are out of school and trapped in work as school dropouts, they continue to dream of returning to education. They think constantly about how to escape the drudgery of labour and imagine the possibility of going back to school. Some feel that they learnt little while in school and that their time there was wasted. Unwilling to add to the family's burden, they quietly withdraw from education. They are acutely aware of the sacrifices their parents make to keep them enrolled. Many carry a deep sense of guilt for having dropped out. As they grow older, many blame themselves for dropping out and wait for a second chance.

Outside school, children work as agricultural labourers, construction workers, head-load carriers, cleaners, helpers in shops and dhabas, workers in brick kilns, stone quarries, and sand

mines and so on. In forest regions, Adivasi children collect forest produce or engage in wage labour. Girls shoulder multiple burdens, combining domestic work, agricultural labour, tobacco processing, and bidi rolling. Many children migrate with or without their families across districts and states, often without knowing where they are going or under what conditions they will work. In situations of debt and distress, contractors negotiate with families, creating conditions that force child labour trafficking.



In such circumstances, childhood becomes intertwined with labour, responsibility, and survival. Drudgery, humiliation, and caste discrimination become normalised. Education lies beyond the realm of everyday possibility.

Poor parents: Demand for education

There is an explosive demand for education among poor parents today. That 98 percent of all children in India are enrolled in schools is an indication of their aspirations to send their children to school. In their wisdom, they see education as a means for mobility, and breaking the cycle of inequality. With the hope that their children reach up to high school they enrol their children to enter the portal of school. In effect many of them gradually drop out of schools before they complete class 8 or class 10.

There are children of the poor who survive and complete secondary school education. We must ask whether their educational journey was sustained by the strength of the education system itself. Was there a sturdy institutional framework that ensured that children, regardless of their social background, received the support, encouragement, and protection necessary to continue their schooling? If the system was indeed capable of enabling children to complete secondary education, why then do millions of other children continue to drop out before reaching that stage?

The answer lies in recognising that individual success stories often conceal the fragility of the system. Some children remain in school because of the exceptional support they received through a committed teacher, a supportive family member, a community intervention, or their own extraordinary determination. These are important and inspiring stories, but they cannot substitute for a reliable education system that guarantees continuity for all children. A child's right to education cannot depend on chance encounters, exceptional individuals, or personal resilience alone.

School dropout, therefore, cannot be understood as an individual failure or as a consequence of children's lack of motivation. It is a manifestation of structural exclusion. When children leave school, it reflects the failure of institutions to protect their right to education and the normalisation of educational inequality. The central question is not why children drop out, but why the education system continues to produce conditions that push children out.

Current forms of exclusion in schools

Exclusion remains deeply embedded in India's education system. Children may be enrolled yet remain excluded from meaningful participation, learning, progression, and completion. It operates through administrative barriers, institutional practices, systemic neglect, digitisation, and growing privatisation and so on. The forms of exclusion disproportionately affect dalit, adivasi, backward-class, minority, migrant, poor, and first-generation learners.

Administrative exclusion: Governance as a barrier

One of the most visible forms of exclusion arises from administrative practices.

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 prohibits schools from refusing admission. Yet children, especially those from marginalised communities, continue to be denied admission because they lack the required documentation, including Aadhaar cards and birth, caste, transfer, or income certificates.



A further transformation is occurring through the rapid expansion of digital governance systems. Student tracking databases, digital attendance systems, online scholarship portals, automated assessment platforms, and integrated educational management information systems are increasingly becoming central to school administration creating new forms of exclusion.

Educational entitlements are becoming dependent on successful digital registration and verification. A missing entry, incorrect Aadhaar linkage, data mismatch, or software error can prevent children from receiving scholarships, textbooks, uniforms, examination hall tickets, or certificates. Such problems disproportionately affect migrant children, whose names are recorded with different spellings across official documents, and those from families with limited digital literacy. As a result, digital systems can

unintentionally reproduce and deepen existing inequalities.

Institutional exclusion: Schools and the experience of not belonging

Exclusion also operates through the everyday culture of schools. Many schools continue to treat parents from poor and marginalised backgrounds with little respect. They are often blamed for their children's poor academic performance or irregular attendance and frequently show little concern when children remain absent for extended periods. They make no attempt to find out why the child was unable to attend school and empathise with the difficulties children face. Such attitudes create mistrust between families and schools. Parents hesitate to engage with teachers, fearing humiliation or indifference. Children learn that their concerns and struggles are invisible within the educational system.

Children also experience exclusion through their daily classroom experiences. Teacher absenteeism, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teaching, and punitive disciplinary practices make learning difficult. Many children struggle to understand lessons but are reluctant to ask questions for fear of reprimand. Children who struggle academically often remain silent because they fear ridicule or punishment. For dalit and adivasi children, these challenges are compounded by experiences of caste discrimination and social prejudice.

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Schools are largely designed around the assumptions and expectations of families with a long history of participation in formal education.

They are unprepared to address families of the first generation who have never interacted with formal education before and are unfamiliar with school routines, attendance requirements, examinations, or administrative procedures. They blame the parent for neglecting the child instead of giving the first-generation learners additional support, actively helping children and families develop confidence, familiarity, and trust in the educational process.

School mergers and exclusion

One of the most significant developments over the past decade has been the consolidation and merger of schools. Official data indicate that the total number of schools in India declined from approximately 15.59 lakh in 2017–18 to about 14.72 lakh in 2023–24. This reduction of nearly 87,000 schools has largely occurred through policies that seek to merge smaller schools into larger complexes or school clusters.

The rationale behind these reforms according to the Governments is that larger schools permit better deployment of teachers, improved infrastructure, enhanced monitoring, and greater efficiency in the use of public resources. Yet such reforms often overlook the importance of neighbourhood access, particularly for children from poor households.



For children living in remote rural areas, tribal habitations, forest regions, hilly terrain, and scattered settlements, the closure or merger of a nearby school has substantially increased the distance to the nearest educational institution. What appears to be a modest increase in distance from an administrative perspective translates into a significant burden for young children who walk long distances every day leading to reduction in attendance.

Research from several States suggests that school transitions and increased travel distances are associated with higher dropout risks among vulnerable groups particularly where transportation is absent or inadequate.

The neighbourhood school has historically served as an important equalising institution. As access becomes increasingly centralised, there is a danger that educational planning will prioritise administrative efficiency over children's actual ability to attend school regularly.

Teacher availability and exclusion

Teacher availability represents another structural challenge. In 2023–24, about 1.11 lakh schools—roughly 7 percent of all schools—were single-teacher institutions serving nearly 40 lakh students. Although this number declined to around 1.04 lakh schools in 2024–25, the problem remains significant, particularly in States such as Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, and Maharashtra.

In many single-teacher schools, one teacher is expected to manage multiple grades simultaneously, teach several subjects, maintain records, oversee mid-day meals, complete administrative tasks, and participate in numerous departmental programmes. Under such conditions, meaningful engagement with individual learners becomes impossible.

The burden falls disproportionately on first-generation learners who require additional academic support. Children who fall behind in the early years frequently remain invisible within overcrowded and under-resourced classrooms. Over time, learning gaps accumulate, producing disengagement, irregular attendance, and eventual dropout.

Privatisation and market-based exclusion

Perhaps the most significant contemporary form of exclusion arises from the growing privatisation of education. Over the past two decades, private schools have expanded rapidly across both urban and rural India. While government schools continue to constitute nearly seventy percent of all schools in the country, private schools educate an increasingly large share of students. In several States, including Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka, Punjab, Haryana, and parts of Maharashtra, nearly half or more of school-going children are estimated to be enrolled in private institutions.

The growth of private schools is often explained through a narrative of parental choice. Parents are said to prefer private schools because of better teaching, English-medium instruction, stronger discipline, or superior academic performance. While these factors influence decisions, they do not fully explain the shift. Equally important is the search for continuity and certainty within an education system that many parents perceive as fragmented and unpredictable.

Many private institutions provide a continuous educational pathway from pre-primary education through secondary or higher secondary schooling. Parents who enrol a child at the age of three often expect that the child will remain within the same institution until Class X or XII. This continuity reduces uncertainty and creates a sense of educational security. Children remain within familiar environments, continue with the same peer groups, and move through successive grades without repeated admission processes or institutional transitions.

Government schools have historically been organised differently. Separate institutions often exist for pre-primary, primary, upper-primary, secondary, and higher-secondary education. Children may be required to shift schools several times during their educational journey. Each transition involves administrative procedures, transfer certificates, documentation requirements, travel arrangements, and adaptation to unfamiliar teachers and environments. For families with limited literacy,

irregular employment, or seasonal migration, these transitions can become significant barriers.

The attraction of private schools therefore reflects not only aspirations for quality but also a search for stability, continuity, and predictability.

However, this continuity comes at a considerable financial cost. Poor and lower-middle-income families frequently make extraordinary sacrifices to keep children in private schools. Educational expenditure often absorbs a substantial proportion of household income. Families incur costs related to tuition fees, uniforms, transport, textbooks, private coaching, digital devices, and school activities. Many take loans, mortgage assets, or reduce expenditure on food, health care, and other essential needs to sustain their children's education.

The consequences can be severe. When families face illness, crop failure, unemployment, indebtedness, migration, or economic shocks, educational expenditure becomes difficult to maintain. Children may be withdrawn from school temporarily, shifted to lower-cost institutions, or pushed into work. In such situations, what began as a strategy for educational advancement culminates in educational discontinuity and exclusion.

Privatisation thus creates a distinct form of educational exclusion. Access to stable educational pathways increasingly depends on a family's capacity to pay. Educational opportunity becomes mediated by market forces rather than guaranteed as a public right.

Yet evidence from several States demonstrates that when government schools are adequately staffed, properly resourced, and effectively managed, families respond positively. Improvements in infrastructure, teacher availability, residential schooling facilities, and school consolidation—when accompanied by adequate support services such as free transportation—have, in many contexts, led to increased enrolment in government schools.

The challenge, therefore, is not an inherent preference for private education but rather the need to build public institutions that provide

both quality and continuity. An integrated school model does not necessarily undermine the principle of neighbourhood schooling. Given the diversity of geographies, locations, and social contexts across the country, there is a need for multiple pathways to access education. Educational arrangements should be flexible enough to respond to local realities, ensuring that every child can access quality schooling regardless of context.

Learning crisis versus crisis of educational justice - exclusion

Contemporary discussions on education are frequently framed in terms of a "learning crisis." Large-scale assessments reveal that many children struggle to read, write, or perform basic arithmetic at age-appropriate levels. Consequently, policy attention has increasingly focused on learning outcomes, competency-based assessments, and programmes aimed at improving foundational literacy and numeracy.

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A newer and increasingly significant form of exclusion emerges through digitisation where technology is often promoted as a solution to educational problems. Digitisation has altered the role of teachers. Standardised content, centrally prescribed pedagogies, and outcome-based monitoring increasingly reduce teachers to implementers of predetermined programmes. Their professional autonomy to respond to local contexts, diverse learners, and classroom realities is diminished. This standardisation overlooks cultural diversity, institutional

histories, and social inequalities, creating another layer of exclusion for children whose learning needs do not fit uniform models.

Further, the language of a learning crisis obscures deeper structural realities. It often locates the problem within classrooms, teaching practices, or student performance while overlooking the broader social and institutional conditions that shape educational participation.

Learning outcomes are profoundly influenced by social inequalities, institutional arrangements, access to resources, and the conditions under which children participate in schooling. The challenge therefore extends beyond learning deficits; it is fundamentally a crisis of educational justice.

A justice-centred perspective shifts attention from average learning outcomes to unequal educational experiences. It recognises that educational achievement cannot be separated from structural issues like inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, administrative barriers, unstable schooling trajectories and questions of dignity, belonging, participation, and rights.

The challenge facing Indian education is therefore not simply a crisis of learning. It is in ensuring that every child can enter school, remain there, participate meaningfully, progress without interruption, and complete education with dignity. Until these structural inequalities are addressed, improvements in learning outcomes alone will remain insufficient to achieve genuine educational inclusion.

Right to education and inclusion

Taken together, these forms of exclusion reveal that the central challenge facing Indian education is a question of ensuring that every child can enter school, remain there, participate with dignity, learn meaningfully, and progress through the system without facing barriers rooted in poverty, caste, geography, technology, or market forces.

Addressing all forms of exclusion requires restoring education as a fundamental right and reaffirming the State's responsibility to guarantee equitable and inclusive schooling for all children.



The Right to Education Act is founded on a principle of zero tolerance towards out-of-school children. As debates on educational reform evolve, the focus must shift from enrolment to continuity. In this context, flexibility in educational pathways as recommended in the NEP 2020 can easily become pathways to permanent exclusion for children affected by poverty, migration, labour, and social disadvantage. The critical policy challenge is therefore not facilitating exit but guaranteeing continuity.

Every child should have access to an uninterrupted educational pathway from early childhood through secondary education.

The proposal in NEP 2020 to extend educational provision from ages three to eighteen deserves support. Early childhood education lays the foundation for later learning, while secondary education has become essential for social,

economic, and democratic participation. However, this commitment should move beyond policy aspiration. Education from ages three to eighteen should be recognised as a fundamental right, creating a legal obligation on the State to ensure access, retention, progression, and completion.

Reclaiming the moral imperative of education

For first-generation learners, going to school is never a routine act. It is a crossing over from fear, uncertainty, exclusion, and humiliation. Children enter school sensing that they do not belong. Their language, clothes, caste, poverty, or migration status mark them as outsiders. Yet every child who walks into a classroom from a dalit locality, adivasi settlement, or migrant colony is making a profound claim: "I belong here too."

The Right to Education is therefore more than a legal entitlement. It is a moral commitment that society cannot abandon its children.

It requires teachers who listen, administrators who care, and institutions that refuse to tolerate exclusion. It requires schools that are fully equipped to embrace the last child and make education possible for her. It requires sustained public investment not only in infrastructure but also in justice.

It requires schools that are inclusive and welcoming—spaces of belonging where every child is seen, respected, and cared for; where they grow with confidence and pride in their school; and where education becomes a source of cherished childhood memories rather than exclusion and humiliation.

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