

Union budget 2021-22 and inclusion in education

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According to Economic Survey 2020-21, India will have the highest population of young people in the world over the next decade. As National Education Policy 2020 rightly points out, our ability to provide high quality and inclusive educational opportunities to them will affect the holistic and sustainable social, economic, political, technological and cultural development of our nation, especially at a juncture where the global economy has become knowledge-driven.

So to reap the benefits of the demographic dividend and to realise the objectives of NEP 2020, the Union Budget 2021-22, with one of its pillars as reinvigorating human capital has many announcements for improving the quality and inclusiveness of our education sector.

- Qualitative strengthening of 15,000 schools to include all the components of NEP 2020.
- Setting up of 100 new Sainik schools in partnership with NGOs, private schools and states.
- Setting up of a Central University in Leh to boost accessible higher education in Ladakh.
- 750 Eklavya Model residential schools in tribal areas aiming at creating a robust infrastructure facility for tribal students.
- Revamping of the post-matric scholarship scheme.
- The National Apprenticeship Training Scheme to amplify apprenticeship opportunities for youth.

- An initiative with the UAE to benchmark skilled qualifications, assessment and certifications, accompanied by the deployment of certified workforce.
- A collaborative inter-training programme between India and Japan to facilitate the transfer of Japanese industrial and vocational skills, techniques and knowledge.

In this article, I would like to examine whether the budget is sufficient to realise the ideal of inclusive education in its true sense.

Norwich (2013, p. 2) sees inclusion as representing 'a contemporary mix of the values of equal opportunity, social respect and solidarity'. The UNESCO Salamanca Statement of 1994 was a landmark in inclusive education which advocated Education for All, recognising the necessity and urgency of providing education for all children, young people and adults 'within the regular education system.'

When every NEP since 1968 has asserted that it is imperative for India to spend 6 percent of its GDP on education, the budget allocation for the Ministry of Education has declined by Rs.6086.89 core to Rs.93224.31 crore in 2021-22. Similarly, the monetary allocation for Samagra Shiksha Abhiyaan, launched for the provision of quality school education to all, has decreased to Rs.31050.16 crore from Rs.38750 crore. This needs particular attention in a knowledge-driven global economic scenario, where countries like New Zealand, Colombia, UK, Chile, US etc spend more than 6 percent of its GDP on education.

The closure of educational institutions following the pandemic has led to a rapid surge in the need for online learning. Majority of the students who are socially and economically backward and residents of rural areas could not quickly shift to this online learning mechanism, as a result of the existing sharp digital divide. According to a survey conducted by Oxfam India in Bihar, Jharkhand, Gujarat, Odisha and Uttar Pradesh, more than 80% of parents of students of government schools reported improper delivery of education because of frequent power cuts, poor digital infrastructure, lack of access to digital gadgets and lack of robust internet connectivity. Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) has found out that online learning is available to only 11% of students, only 20 per cent of families with children have access to the Internet and only 11 per cent of households possess any type of computer. The problem is even more severe in rural India, where less than 15 per cent of families have access to digital infrastructure. The fear of limited or no education or the fear of falling behind the peers, the feeling of "othering" and non-belongingness could stimulate the

students to discontinue their studies or drop out even after the restoration of the normalcy. The budget lacks measures to make impactful and influential digital learning at all levels available for all, irrespective of their social, economic and educational status.

According to Economic Survey 2020-21, the attendance rate in early childhood education, which the NEP 2020 states as a prerequisite, is low and diverging. The lack of entry of new children in schools is likely to increase and the age specific attendance ratio (ASAR) is likely to decline following the pandemic induced poverty, fear of the virus, fear of falling behind the peers due to the digital schism, lack of support in homes to aid digital learning etc. The interventions towards retention of students are almost absent in the budget.

There is no budgetary provision for mainstreaming out of school children marginalized by poverty, gender, caste and disability through special learning centres. NSSO's household survey affirms the existence of 3.2 crore out of school children in India which UNESCO has projected to double due to the pandemic.

Even when girls have been disproportionately affected due to the pandemic and the subsequent closure of educational institutions (UNESCO), the budget for National Scheme for Incentive to Girls for Secondary Education has been slashed by Rs.100 crore. There has been complete "budgetary silence" in addressing the gender gaps in literacy rate attainment. Female literacy remained below national average among various social groups of SC, ST and OBC. The literacy rate among transgenders or initiatives for its improvement have not found a place in the economic survey or budget of the world's largest democratic country even in the 21st century. The superstitions emanating from the patriarchal social structure embody women as the torchbearers of family's dignity, leading to mobility restrictions after puberty, early marriages and ultimately discontinuation of education. These questions of gender politics in the economics of education have remained largely unanswered in the Union Budget 2021-22. (Table 1)

Table 1: Percentage of literates (age 7 years and above) by social groups in 2017-18

Category Social group	Rural + Urban	
	Male	Female
ST	77.5	61.3
SC	80.3	63.9
OBC	84.4	68.9
Others	90.8	80.6
All	84.7	70.3

Source: NSS Report 585: Households' Social Consumption on Education in India, 2017-18

Research studies support that the access to bare necessities through its possible linkages can positively impact educational indicators as well. For instance, water hauling, a daily activity, consumes substantial time and effort of a household. It is found that water hauling activity is negatively associated with the girls' school attendance (Nauges and Strand, 2011; Sekhri, 2013). Access to latrine in schools substantially increases enrolment of pubescent-age girls (Adukia, 2016). There is a strong correlation between electricity consumption per capita and higher scores on the education index across countries (Makoto and Nakata, 2008). The budget has failed to explore the relation between BNI levels and education indicators.

According to reports, a large scale reverse migration from private schools to government schools would be experienced due to the current financial crisis inflicted on families and households by the pandemic. Large scale nationwide schemes to mitigate the infrastructural bottlenecks in government schools to handle this large scale reverse migration and make the schools inclusive beyond the politics of gender, caste etc have been absent in the budget. Among the government schools in India, only 20.7 per cent have computer, 67.4 per cent have electricity connection, 74.2 per cent have ramps and 14.8 per cent have incinerator.

One in every six children within the age group of four to 10 years experience serious neurodevelopmental and behavioural issues and emotional difficulties. The students with learning difficulties and differently abled students have even more serious problems due to constrained learning atmospheres and enforced restrictions in their learning environments. Except for the standardisation of Indian sign language, the budget is devoid of measures to make learning more engaging and easy for them. According to studies, adolescents face acute and chronic stress due to ineffective online learning mechanism leading to anxiety disorders,

depression and suicides. The provision of consistent professional psycho-social support to them remains unaddressed in the budget.

Summing up, the budget has not transcended beyond certain ostensible, populous measures. In spite of certain superficial announcements, the budget lacks bottom up interventions to transform the current educational scenario to more qualitative, more inclusive, more blended-learning friendly, more collaborative, more experiential, engaging and real time and more technologically integrated to realize the ideals of a knowledge based economy and NEP 2020 of a more qualitative and inclusive education. Therefore, it has failed the students who are the flagbearers of India's holistic development to posterity and beyond.