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Commentary

Between RTE and NEP: Persisting Challenges in India's School Education System

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CONTEXT

The enactment of the Right to Education Act 2010 (RTE) and the introduction of the New Education Policy 2020 (NEP) can be considered two important milestones in India's education policy landscape over the last two decades. The RTE describes the modalities of free and compulsory education for children in the age group of 6-14 years. It also maps out the roles and responsibilities of the Centre, state, and local bodies to rectify gaps in their education systems to improve the country's quality of education. On the other hand, the NEP — introduced in July 2020 — intends to introduce global education patterns in Indian systems, do away with 'rote learning', and provide students with a more holistic education. The two inherently differ in terms of their nature — one being a binding legal instrument and the other being a policy framework. However, considering the issues they seek to address are similar, a comparative analysis is required to gauge the trajectory that school education in India might take in the next decade.

On the other hand, the NEP — introduced in July 2020 — intends to introduce global education patterns in Indian systems, do away with 'rote learning', and provide students with a more holistic education.

At the macro-level, there are three clearly identifiable challenges in India's school education system — inequitable access to education, out-of-school children (OOSC), and poor learning outcomes [1]. Additionally, hitherto, policies have lacked focus on early childhood learning. This commentary looks at the impact of the RTE on these challenges after a decade of its enactment. It also analyses whether the NEP seeks to address these challenges sufficiently.

SCHOOL EDUCATION POST THE RTE

The RTE, enforced on 01 April 2010, prescribes minimum norms for public elementary schools for the provision of free and compulsory education to children in the 6-14 age group [2]. The Act also provides guidelines to keep checks on all neighbourhoods through regular surveys to identify children who are eligible to receive an education but do not have the means to attain it. It also lays down norms and standards for infrastructural facilities for schools such as classrooms with suitable furniture, separate toilets for girls and boys, drinking water facilities, etc. It also provides for 25% reservation of seats in all private, unaided educational institutions for students from economically weaker sections to address the issue of inequitable access.

Enrolment and Dropouts

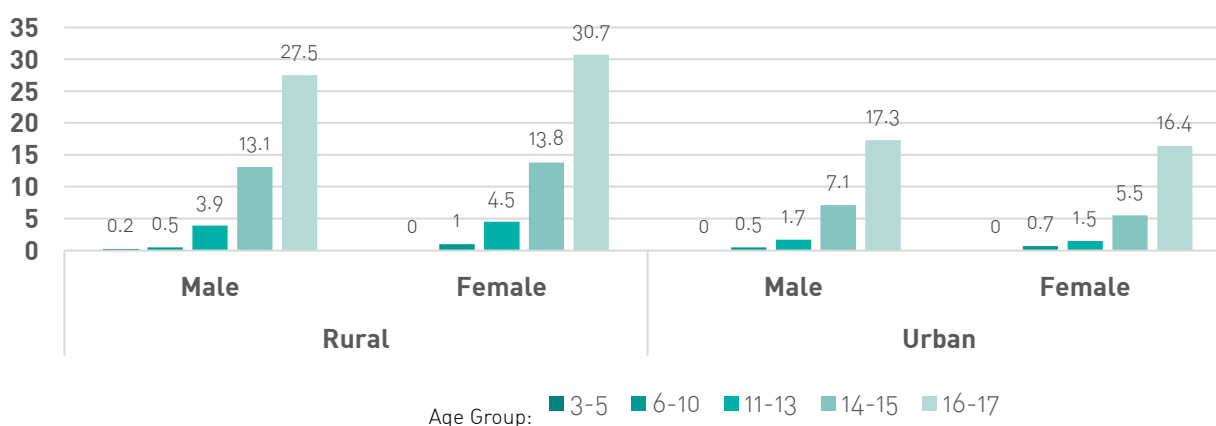
After the enactment of the RTE, between 2010-2016, there was a significant increase in the Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) at the upper primary level accompanied by a decrease in the same at the primary level (Table 1 below) [3]. Available data indicates that the GER tends to decrease as one moves from primary to upper primary and secondary levels, indicating an increase in dropout rates across higher age cohorts (Figure 1 below) [4]. Notably, rural females constitute the highest share of dropouts.

Table 1: Gross Enrolment Rate at Primary and Upper-primary levels

Level/ Year	Primary (I-V) 6-10 Years			Upper-primary (VI-VIII) 11-13 Years		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
2010-11	114.9	116.3	115.5	87.5	82.9	85.2
2011-12	105.8	107.1	106.5	82.5	81.4	82
2012-13	104.8	107.2	106	80.6	84.6	82.5
2013-14	100.2	102.6	101.4	86.3	92.8	89.3
2014-15	98.9	101.4	100.1	87.7	95.3	91.2
2015-16	97.9	100.7	99.2	88.7	97.6	92.8

Source: Education Statistics at a Glance 2018, Ministry of Education, GoI

Figure 1: Percentage of dropouts across age groups, gender, and location



Source: Household Social Consumption on Education in India, NSS 75th round (2017-18), Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, GoI

A silver lining here could be that there was a considerable decline in the number of out-of-school children (OOSC) after the RTE was enacted. According to UNICEF, this number went from 13.5 million in 2006 to 6 million in 2014 [1], while the 2018 Annual Status of Education Report concluded that around 2.8% of children in the 6-14 age group were not enrolled in school [5]. However, as per the estimates of the 2017-18 household survey conducted by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), there were 32 million OOSC in India [4]. While there could have been a genuine increase in the number of OOSC due to various reasons, there is also a high degree of discrepancy in data from various surveys owing to differences in definitions and methodologies [6].

Early Childhood Learning and Poor Outcomes

Research has shown that 90% of brain development happens by age five, indicating that the learning environment that children get at an early age has a prominent impact on their future [7]. The RTE, as part of its principal mandate, has fixed age six as the appropriate age for children to enter Standard 1, while effectively leaving out the provision of free and compulsory pre-primary education which is essential in the formative years. However, a 2017 UNICEF impact study on early childhood education suggested that in India, pre-school enrolment does not necessarily follow the age-based linear mandate recommended by policies like the RTE [7]. As per the study, 12.3% of 4-year-olds (pre-primary age) in Rajasthan and 7.9% of those in Telangana were in primary school while 26.3% of 6-year-olds in Rajasthan and 29.1% in Telangana were in pre-primary [ibid]. In Assam, 54.7% of 6-year-olds were in pre-primary. The study concluded that children frequently move back and forth between pre-primary and primary across states with enrolments stabilising by age eight.

The age-based linear structure, presumed by policymakers and those who design curricula, inevitably leads to children being forced to study and master developmentally unsuited content [ibid]. This mismatch has led to a significant share of children not being able to perform cognitive, language and numeracy tasks (Table 2 below) in school surveys, particularly in government schools [8]. According to a recent UNESCO report, around 22% of 15-year-olds in rural India had grade-2 reading skills [9].

Table 2: Children aged 4-5 who can correctly perform tasks by schooling status

Task	Age 4			Age 5		
	Govt pre-School	Pvt LKG/UKG	Not enrolled	Govt pre-school	Pvt LKG/UKG	Not enrolled
Cognitive Tasks						
Sorting	63.8	79.3	44.9	77.5	87.2	62.1
Spatial awareness	51.7	65.5	34.2	62.2	76.7	51.7
Seriation	39.4	49.5	22.6	41.2	58.8	29.7
Pattern Recognition	38.8	43.4	30.7	43.4	49.9	30.1
Puzzle	31	47.1	16.3	45	58.9	23

Early Language Tasks						
Picture description	53.5	67.2	39	63.7	76.6	50.2
Listening comprehension	13.8	24.8	10	23.5	40.4	17.4
Numeracy Tasks						
Counting objects	23.1	40.1	8.2	36.8	57.6	20.7
Relative comparison (Objects)	37.3	51.3	21.7	53.8	71.2	37.8

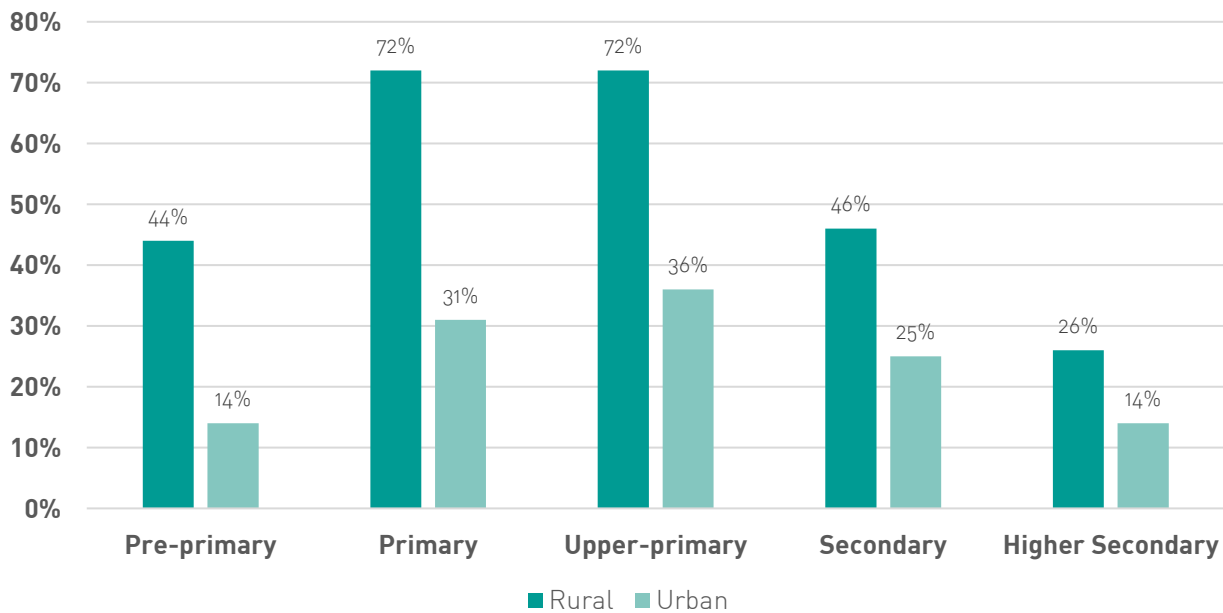
Source: Annual Status of Education Report 2019, ASER Centre

The other key aspect that affects the quality of learning outcomes is the Pupil-Teacher Ratio (PTR), which, as mandated by the RTE, is 23:1 for primary level and 24:1 for secondary level. However, uniformity across states in this aspect is yet to be achieved. In states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, one teacher is tasked with handling close to 40 students, thus compromising the quality of education imparted to the students [10]. Some researchers have suggested that to improve the level of individual attention to students, the PTR must be lower than the values set by the RTE [11].

Inequitable Access to Education

When it comes to access to education (quality or otherwise), evidence suggests that there are distinct inequities in terms of gender and caste. About 50% of the recognised primary schools in the country did not have a separate toilet for girls in 2013 [11]. In rural areas, the share of schools with usable toilets for girls stood at 66% in 2018 [12]. Gender gaps are visible even in terms of enrolment in the pre-primary and primary age cohorts. For instance, among children aged 4-5, more girls (56.8%) are enrolled in government schools than boys (50.4%), while more boys (49.6%) are enrolled in private schools than girls (43.2%) [8]. Similar inequities can be found in terms of caste as students from the Scheduled Castes constitute only 19.6% and 17.3% of total students at the primary and higher secondary level [13]. Students from the Scheduled Tribes have an even smaller representation at 10.6% and 6.8% at primary and higher secondary levels respectively [ibid].

The RTE's fundamental mandate—access to free education—is itself still far from being realised (Figure 2 below). In fact, the share of students availing free education in private schools is only 2% in rural and 1% in urban areas, indicating a clear lack of access to quality education nationally [4].

Figure 2: Students receiving free education across grades

Source: Household Social Consumption on Education in India, NSS 75th round (2017-18), Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, GoI

Additionally, access to digital education varies across regions, with about 4.4% of rural households and 23.4% of urban households having computers. Among these, 42% in urban areas have computers with an internet connection with this fraction being only 14.9% in rural areas [4].

THE NEP: IMPROVEMENTS AND CONCERNS

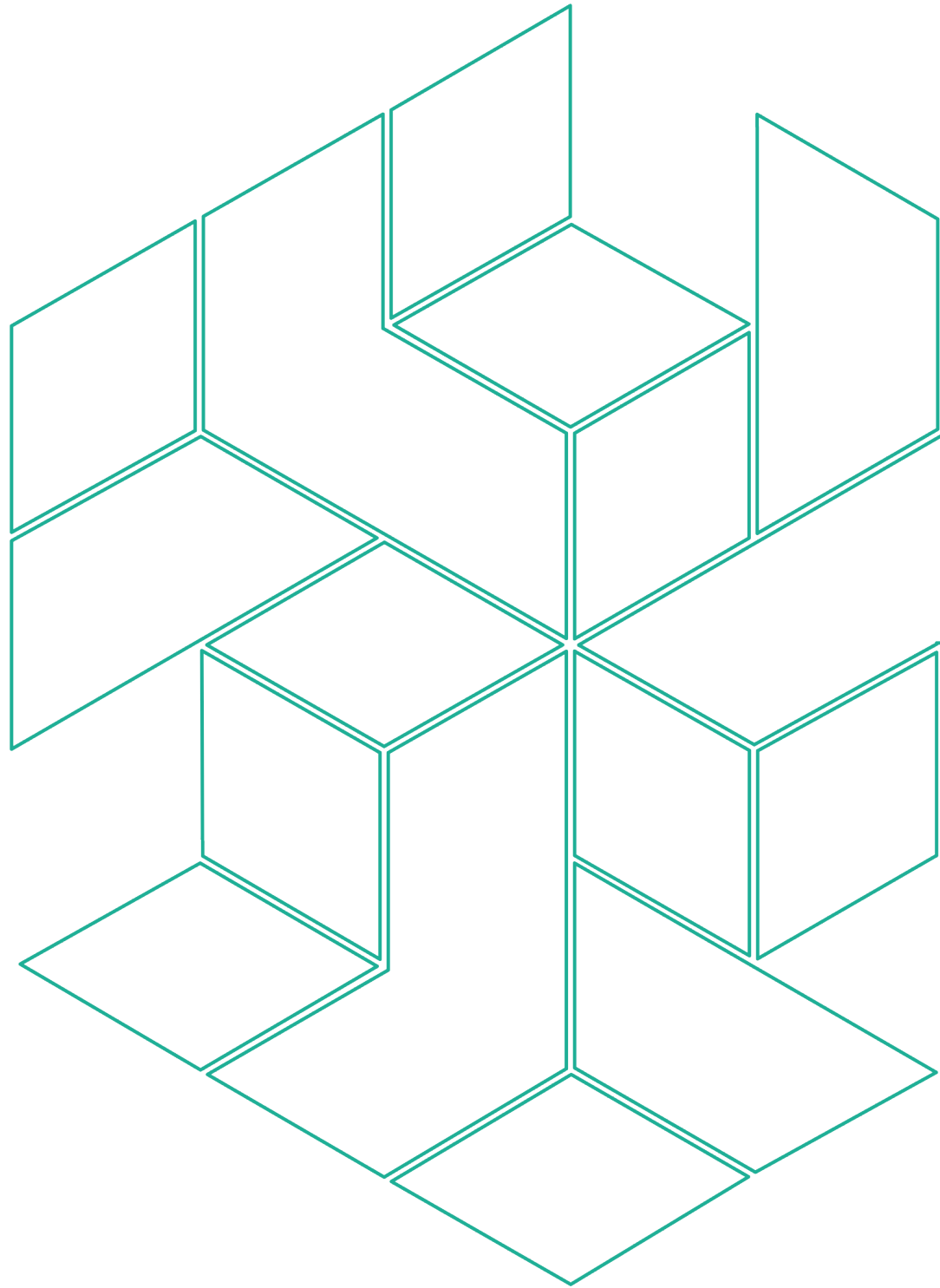
The NEP 2020 emphasises universal access to school education mainly through increasing the Gross Enrolment Ratio and finding ways to reduce dropout rates [13]. The government aims at bringing 20 million children back into mainstream education. The NEP will also replace the 10+2 system with a 5+3+3+4 curricular structure corresponding to ages 3-8, 8-11, 11-14 and 14-18. This will include 3 years of pre-schooling in Anganwadi centres for children between 3-8 years of age, followed by 12 years of formal education. The increased focus on pre-schooling years is a clear improvement when compared to the RTE's focus on children in the 6-14 age bracket. However, it seems the NEP also doesn't recognise the irregularities in early childhood education in India, making it susceptible to the impact of a linear age-based mandate as discussed earlier. To address dropout rates, especially among girls, the NEP provides for a Gender Inclusion Fund and expansion of model schools like the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas. Additionally, Special Education Zones are provisioned to make schools more easily accessible to underprivileged students by allowing them to stay in school without having to worry about transportation costs, costs of food, etc. Breakfast has also been added to the mid-day meal scheme that is provided at schools to incentivise economically weaker sections to continue with their education. While these are welcome moves, there is no mention of new budgetary allocations in this regard in the policy. While that is understandable, the policy does seem to have a greater focus on creating model schools and new infrastructure for challenges that could be addressed by better implementation and monitoring of existing projects.

While the RTE had unsatisfactory minimum eligibility requirements for the appointment of teachers, the NEP recommends setting up of the National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPST) to address this problem. One of the main barriers to better school infrastructure and quality of education was the lack of clear demarcation between the Centre and the state's responsibilities, which led to administrative tussles [14]. An example of the state and central governments' conflicting actions is that many states have conveniently skipped the clause of 'free education' while framing their rules to implement the RTE. The NEP improves on this aspect as it lays out clear roles and responsibilities of administrative bodies at the state and the central level.

The NEP emphasises the universalisation of education from 3-18 years of age without making it a legal right for children. Thus, there is no mandatory mechanism available with, or to be developed by, the union and state governments to make universalisation a reality. This could be achieved by an amendment to the RTE in the near-term. To conclude, considering the impact of the RTE on school education, the reforms under the NEP are certainly desirable with the critical challenge being their implementation.

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