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CONTENTS

BOOK REVIEWS

Evaluating the Possibility of Achieving SDG 4 in Manipur: A Study of the Performance Across Social Groups

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Abstract

The positive linkages between education and sustainable economic development through human capital formation have been well understood. The objectives of the Sustainable Development Goal 4 focus on equitable and inclusive education as a key to a progressive and prosperous society. The paper aims to argue that the achievement of the objective of SDG 4 will be determined through the achievements of the 4 strategic priorities of education development approach, i.e., expansion, equity/inclusion, excellence and employability, as defined by the Ministry of Education's policy document 'Education For All: Towards Quality with Equity' (NUEPA, 2014).

The paper examines the performance of educational achievement of the north eastern state of Manipur, India, on such parameters as literacy, enrolment, promotion, repetition, retention, dropout and transition rates and learning outcomes of children at various school education stages across various social groups. UIDSE, ASER, NAS and SDG NER Indices for Educational data from 2012-2022 were used to analyse the performance. The data are presented in tabular and graphical forms.

The study concluded that although Manipur has seen much better performance than other states in India over various parameters, as seen through its focus of equity and inclusion, resulting in bridging the gender gaps in participation in education, achievement gaps continue to exist across social groups. Progress in access seems remarkable across social groups. The GPI of GER and other indicators of access show a remarkable gender parity. Progress has also been made in the expansion of education by the rise in the number of primary schools.

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However, the performance gap exists across social groups where the so-called marginalised class (SC/ST) do much better in the learning outcome indicators. The relatively higher dropout rates and unsatisfactory student learning levels across all groups continue to cause concern. Another challenge is the spatial distribution of the availability of educational institutions.

Introduction

The positive synergies between development of human capital through education and growth of the economy have been well established. The human capital theory, advanced in the 1960s by Gary Becker and Theodore Schultz, perceives education from its instrumental value: its contribution to private and social returns. According to Dreze (2005), "*education contributes not only to economic growth but also to demographic change, political democracy, social equality, and indeed many other aspects of development.*" In recent literature the "economic returns to education," where education is seen as an investment, gained popularity (Todaro,1991; Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2004; Nica, 2012). The benefits of investing in basic education, both for its intrinsic value in enhancing human capabilities, as well as for its social development and economic growth, greater efficiency, and better functioning of democratic institutions (Rajapakse, 2016) have been well understood and pursued.

From this perspective, the returns from education in terms of the benefits that individuals reaped or expect to reap will be what determines the demand for education. This understanding provides various frameworks in which education evaluation has been done.

According to the Education for All Global Monitoring Report (2009), it has been estimated that "*global poverty can be decreased by 12 per cent if all children in less developed countries can get access to elementary education*" (Gonzales, P, 2008). The pathway through which investment in human capital formation provides an impetus to economic boom by improving the quality of elementary education and breaking the vicious circle of poverty of a less developed country and thus resulting in overall development of the economy, has been well studied and understood (Psacharopoulos & Woodhall, 1993; Krueger & Lindahl, 2001). The correlation between wealth and learning levels, both across countries and within countries, has also been documented (Barro, 2013; Hanushek and Woessmann, 2010; Okidi & Guloba, 2006).

Understanding the importance of human capital formation through education, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015 has quality education as its fourth objective. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 has 10 targets to its mission statement that seeks to "*Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.*" The objectives of the SDG 4 focus on equitable and inclusive education as a key to prosperity and provision of opportunity to open up the possibility of contribution by individuals towards a progressive and healthy society. It aims to eliminate all discrimination in education through provision of free and compulsory education, universal literacy and numeracy, and increase the number of youths with relevant skills for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship.

The achievement of the 10 targets of SDG 4 are depend on the achievements of the following *four mutually supporting strategic priorities of education development approach, i.e., expansion, equity/inclusion, excellence, and employability'* as defined by the Ministry of

Education's 'Education For All' policy document (NUEPA, 2014). The four parameters in the same strategic approach are quoted below. *Expansion* strategy is to focus on *making educational facilities and learning opportunities available for and accessible to all*. The focus of **equity/inclusion** is on *bridging the gender and social category gaps in participation in education. It recognises the right of every individual to education without discrimination on any grounds and gives priority to education of the excluded, vulnerable, under-served and other disadvantaged groups*. Another important priority of education sector development programmes in India to achieve SDG 4 objective is to focus on achieving **excellence** by *improving the quality and relevance of education and enabling all children and young people to achieve expected/specified learning outcomes*. The focus should also be accorded to the *task of enhancing **employability** of the products of the education system*.

In a situation where public education is not freely available or not reliable even if available, the demand for education is hindered by various economic and social factors. Various layers of inequality that exist in society will have a long-term impact not just on the attainment of education but on the outcome as well. Understanding and evaluating educational outcomes requires a deeper understanding of the various inequalities and disadvantages that might exist in a society.

The three important pillars by which we understand how education is acquired are accessibility, affordability, and availability. These three pillars encompass the economic, social, and political factors behind the attainment, outcome, and benefit of education. The Indian constitution in its original enactment defined education as a state subject. Under Article 42 of the constitution, an amendment was added in 1976 and education became a concurrent list subject which enables the central government to legislate it in a manner suited to it. Therefore, the basis of and achievement of educational outcomes in the states such as Manipur can be influenced to a large extent by the broader policy and objectives at the national level.

In this paper, the authors aim to argue in broad terms that the achievement of the objective of SDG 4, i.e., quality education, is determined through the achievement of the 4 strategic priorities of education development approach mentioned earlier. Specifically, the paper is an attempt to look at the same argument in the context of a small state in northeast India, i.e., Manipur. For achieving the SDG 4 objectives, it is important to focus on the factors that might enable or hinder the achievements of universalisation of quality education. Barriers may exist in societies due to inequality arising (i) both at the regional geographical levels or (ii) due to gaps in policies and implementation at the macro level and (iii) due to gender, race/caste, or class at the individual level. The paper therefore is an attempt to document the imbalances in educational attainment, if any, between rural and urban areas and across various social groups, by using the data available, and identifying the causes for the same.

The paper analyses various existing state-level data available from Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE), SDG India index, and Annual Survey on Education Reports (ASER) in order to understand the performance of the state on various indicators of education. It also compares the state performances with both the targets set by SDG India Index as well as average performance of India as and when relevant to highlight the progress towards achievement of the SDG 4 objectives.

Data Sources

UIDSE Plus: Unified District Information System for Education Plus is an initiative of the Department of School Education and Literacy, Ministry of Education, Government of India. It is one of the most comprehensive nationwide databases available on educational achievement, covering district level data on the number of schools, infrastructure availability, enrolment, promotion, retention, dropout, transition rates in various levels of education. It records information across various social groups.

ASER: The Annual Status of Education Report is a nationwide survey which collects district level reports on educational achievements in terms of enrolment and learning outcomes of rural children between the ages of 5 and 16, across India. The data collected are the basic literacy and numeracy using assessment tools administered orally or on one to one. It publishes its report annually and is considered one of the most reliable reports in the country.

NITI Aayog SDG4 NER Index: NITI Aayog's SDG4 NER index is the district wise report on the status of the North Eastern Region on the performance in Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) in education which is the fourth goal. Goal 4 of SDG focusses on quality education – with an objective to '*Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*'

NAS: According to the NAS website, the National Achievement Survey (NAS) "*is a national level large-scale assessment conducted to obtain information about the learning achievement of students of Classes 3, 5, 8 and 10 studying in State Govt. schools, Govt. Aided schools, Private Unaided and Central Govt. schools.*" It collects data on competency in maths and language as per the official learning objectives using paper and pencil tests administered on students.

The paper would like to point out the limitations of the study in terms of the reliability of the datasets used. There have been various reports on incompleteness of data, related with the difficulties schools face in updating UIDSE data annually. Various discrepancy in data has been pointed out as reports of enrollment has dipped, dropout rates have risen in many states such as Uttar Pradesh. It needs mentioning also here that district level data collection can be prohibitively expensive and tedious which might result in decrease in reliability of the dataset.

As far as learning outcome measurements are concerned, NAS states averages are higher than ASER. This could be due to the data sources using different assessment tools and different sampling strategies, thus making comparability of the students' skills and learning outcomes difficult. There are also concerns regarding whether the data is large enough and the assessment tools are comprehensive enough as per international standards. Thus, the necessity to also be careful about measurement errors and therefore need for specialized training of data collectors and enumerators

Another concern in dealing with large datasets is the requirement for more information to understand factors for inter district differences in results and prescribe policies for better performance or progress. The correlation between income and school enrolment, dropout, retention, transition and learning outcomes cannot be dismissed.

Existing Studies on Manipur's Performance in Education Sector

Many earlier studies on the education sector in Manipur have highlighted the considerable improvement of the sectors despite the problems of poverty, underdevelopment, and violence in the state. The positive outcomes achieved can be seen in terms of the high literacy rates and gender parity in enrolment in recent years. As per the 2011 census, Manipur ranks 5th among the north-eastern states of India in terms of literacy. The literacy rate has increased from 70.50 per cent in 2001 to 76.94 per cent in 2011. Among males, it has increased from 80.30 per cent in 2001 to 83.58 per cent in 2011, whereas among females, it has increased from 60.50 per cent in 2001 to 70.26 per cent in 2011. These improvements in literacy rates, Marchang (2020a) asserts, are determined by "*an increase of motivation and expectation of parents, reduction of poverty, improvement of income, increase in government educational schemes and rise of school enrolment among other reasons.*"

Although positive development can be seen in some respects, many recent studies have identified and highlighted both the contemporary political issues and challenges of education in the state. The disruption of the education system because of the state being a troubled/disturbed area has often been highlighted. This has resulted in the huge migration of students from rural areas to Imphal and outmigration to other Indian states, with an aim of getting better education (Kengoo, 2012; Devi, 2011; Karam & Somokanta, (2016). The other aspects studied are the high rate of educated unemployed tribal youth (Kengoo, 2012), negligence of Manipur government in the provision of quality education (Singh 2011), low enrolment rate, especially in primary education (Gupta et al, 2003), infrastructural underdevelopment (Marchang, 2020b) and poor functioning of the educational institutions (Kengoo, 2012). The persistence of these issues could act as a barrier in the achievement of the SDG 4 objectives. In the light of this, it is important to understand the current experiences in the education sector in the state. The data available on various aspects of education are from Unified District Information System for Education (UIDSE) and Annual Status of Education Report (ASER).

In the state the school level education is primarily looked after by the State Government whereas the high school stage of education comprising classes from class IX to X are under the academic control of the Board of Secondary Education, Manipur. Higher Secondary School Education (class XI to XII) comes under the purview of Council of Higher Secondary Education, Manipur.

Recent Performance of Manipur on SDG 4 Indicators

The North-Eastern Region (NER) District Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Index Report and Dashboard is a joint initiative of NITI Aayog and Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (M/DoNER) towards localisation of SDGs at the level of the districts of the NER. The NER SDG 4 index score in 2020-21 ranks districts into achievers (score 100), front runners (score 65-99), performers (score 50-64) and aspirants (score 0-49) according to their performances. There was no district in the entire NER which was ranked among achiever. In Manipur, eight out of nine districts were ranked among the front runners and

one district was a performer. Table 1 below shows the performance of districts in various parameters compared to the best performer in the NER and against the target.

FIGURE 1

Map Showing the SDG Performance in the 9 Districts of Manipur*
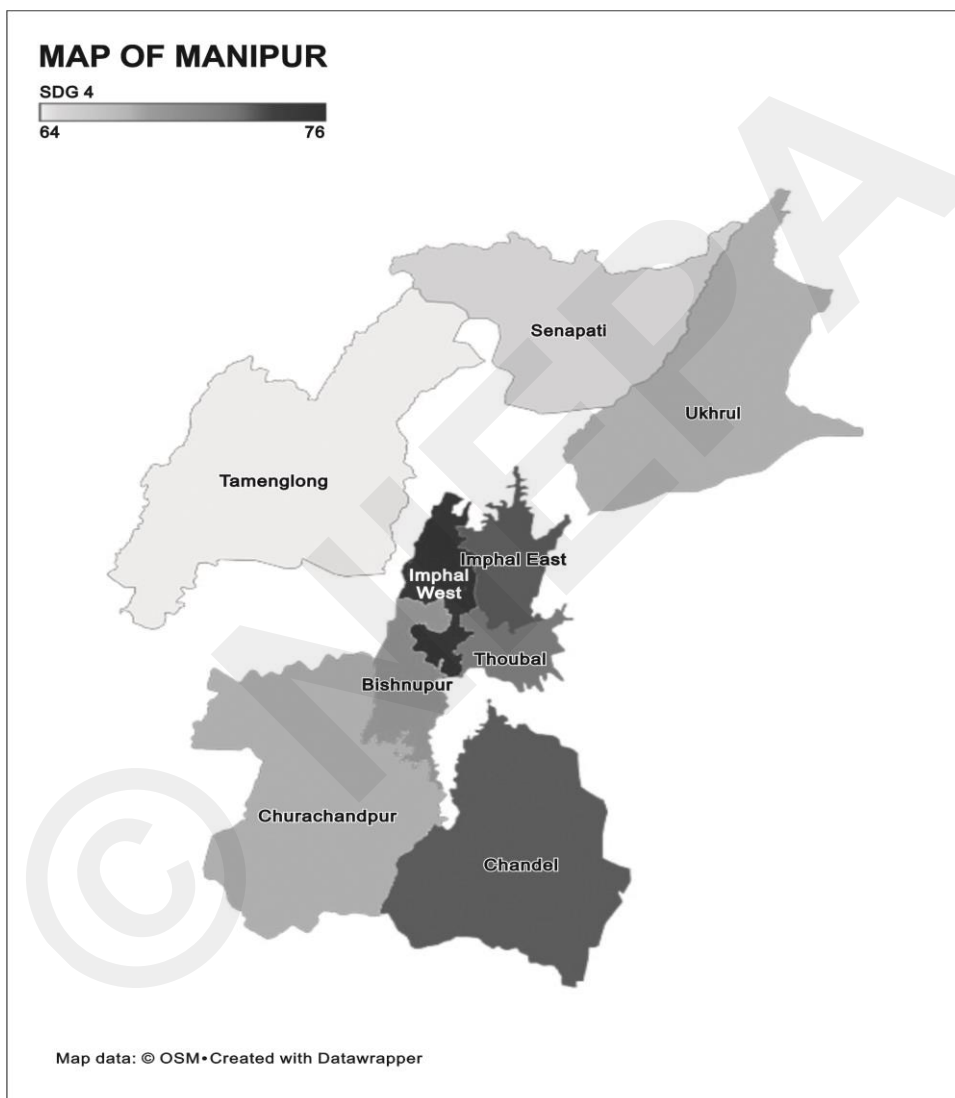
(* The map does not include the new district created recently.)

TABLE 1

**Performance in SDG 4 against Target:
Comparison between Districts in Manipur, 2021**

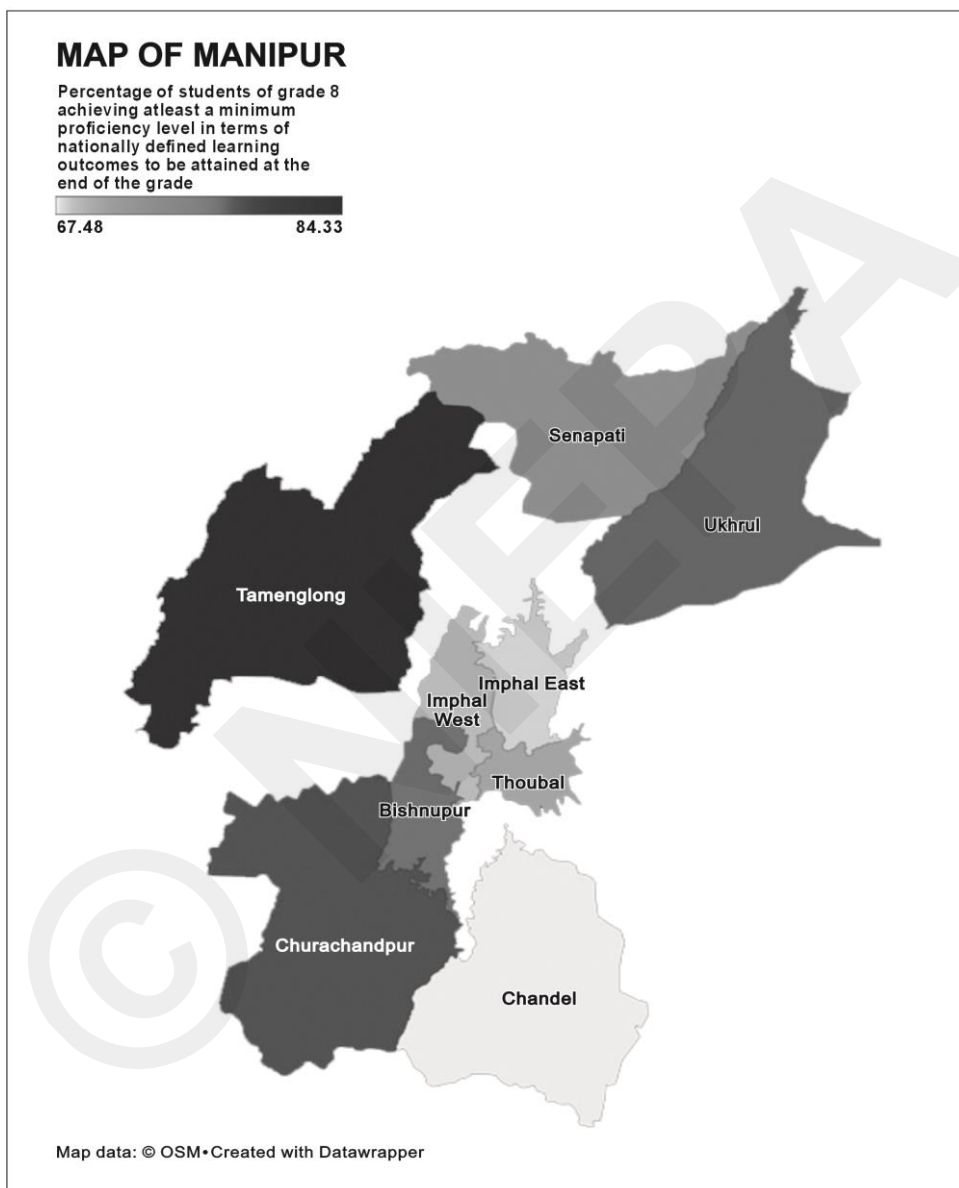| District	Average annual drop-out rate at secondary level (Class 9-10)	Ratio of female to male enrolment at secondary level (Class 9-10)	Percentage of students in grade 8 achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in terms of nationally defined learning outcomes to be attained at the end of the grade	Percentage of schools with computers available	Percentage of schools with access to electricity	Percentage of trained teachers at secondary level (Class 9-10)	Pupil Teacher Ratio at secondary Level (Class 9-10)	SDG 4
Bishnupur	18.29	0.96	77.19	43.41	74.28	59.33	12	70
Chandel	4.03	1.02	67.48	16.88	51.95	90.36	9	73
Churachandpur	17.20	0.10	78.32	26.24	44.30	72.93	13	68
Imphal East	4.87	0.97	67.97	41.36	68.54	72.27	10	73
Imphal west	0.00	1.03	68.74	52.09	69.40	60.66	9	76
Senapati	15.2	0.10	73.10	22.82	35.77	63.64	10	65
Tamenglong	26.38	1.17	84.33	13.92	16.12	89.53	9	64
Thoubal	15.66	0.98	70.07	42.58	75.27	66.86	11	72
Ukhrul	15.84	0.99	77.70	26.67	36.64	82.12	10	68
Best NER Aizawl	5.11	1.09	83.36	71.15	95.65	85.18	11	89
Target	3.21	1	100	100.0	100	100	30	100

Source: SDG NER Index, Niti Aayog

Table 1 shows the average relative performance of all the districts, compared to most of the other districts in NER and India. The district-wise performance shows that on all the indicators except pupil-teacher ratio (PTR) and gender parity (GPI) in higher education, almost all districts showed a below average performance. Overall Senapati, Tamenglong, Churachandpur and Ukhrul which are the rural districts in the state according to the backwardness index (Ranking of district according to backwardness, NFDB) fared relatively worse off than the urban districts. Chandel, although a backward district performed as well as the urban districts. Average annual dropout rates are not too high except in few districts, although much higher than the target. The poor performance of Churachandpur and Senapati in ratio of female to male enrolment in higher education is noteworthy considering the better relative performance in learning outcomes. Infrastructure constraint is visible through the poor availability of computer facilities and trained teachers in most districts. The table therefore shows that most districts have a long way to go in order to join the achiever category in SDG 4.

FIGURE 2

Map Showing District-wise Learning Outcome*

(* The map does not include the new district created recently.)

TABLE 2

Relative Performance of Manipur against India and the Target

Indicators	Adjusted NER in Elementary education (class 1-8)	Average annual dropout rate at secondary level (class 9-10)	GER in higher secondary (class 11-12)	Percentage of students in grade VIII achieving atleast a minimum proficiency level in terms of nationally defined learning outcomes to be attained by the pupils at the end of the grade	GER in higher education (18-23 years)	Percentage of persons with disability who have completed at least secondary education (15 years and above)	GPI for higher education (18-23 years)	Percentage of persons who are literate (15 years and above)	Percentage of schools with access to basic infrastructure (electricity, drinking water)	Percentage of trained teachers at Secondary level (class 9-10)	Pupil Teacher Ratio (PTR) at secondary level (class 9-10)	SDG 4 Index Score
Target	100	8.8	100	100	50	100	1	100	100	100	30	100
All India	87.26	17.87	50.14	71.9	26.3	19.3	1	74.6	84.76	82.62	21	57
Manipur	100	13.03	54.82	72.3	33.7	28.9	1.01	85.60	68.92	55.50	10	63

Source: SDG NER index, NITI Aayog

Table 2 shows the relative performance of Manipur against India and the set targets. Overall, the state performs better than India in most of the indicators although they are far away from achieving the targets. The GPI in higher education score of Manipur is very high with a better performance than the target, a reflection maybe of the gender equality in the state. Literacy rate of 15 years and above is also very high. Although the ANER is very high (100 per cent) in the Class 1-8 level, there is a sharp drop in the GER in higher secondary (54.8 per cent) and an even sharper drop in higher education (33 per cent). Learning outcome indicators also need to be improved as these could be related to the drop in enrolment at higher levels of education. As already shown in the previous table, the need for the state to concentrate in infrastructure development and provision is indicated by the low percentage of schools with basic infrastructure and trained teachers.

Having seen the latest reports of performance in various indicators, in the following sections the paper attempts to look at the trends in performance of various indicators over time (2012-21) to analyse the feasibility of achieving SDG 4 targets in the state.

Trends in Performances of the Education Sector in Manipur: An Analysis

Expansion Evaluation through Universal Access: In Manipur the extent of participation in education is very impressive at the lower levels of education as shown by the Net Enrolment Ratio (NER) and ASER (Age-Specific Enrolment ratio) for the period under study. However, the analysis given below shows that although gender parity exists in access and provisioning at all levels, the participation rate falls very sharply at higher levels.

Net Enrolment Ratio (NER) in Different Levels of Education: NER is the extent of participation in a given level of education in the appropriate age groups. The lower the total net enrolment rate, the higher is the equivalent rate of out-of-school, and the greater is the need to focus on improving access to education.

FIGURE 3

Progress in NER by Gender by Level of Education in Manipur: 2012-2021
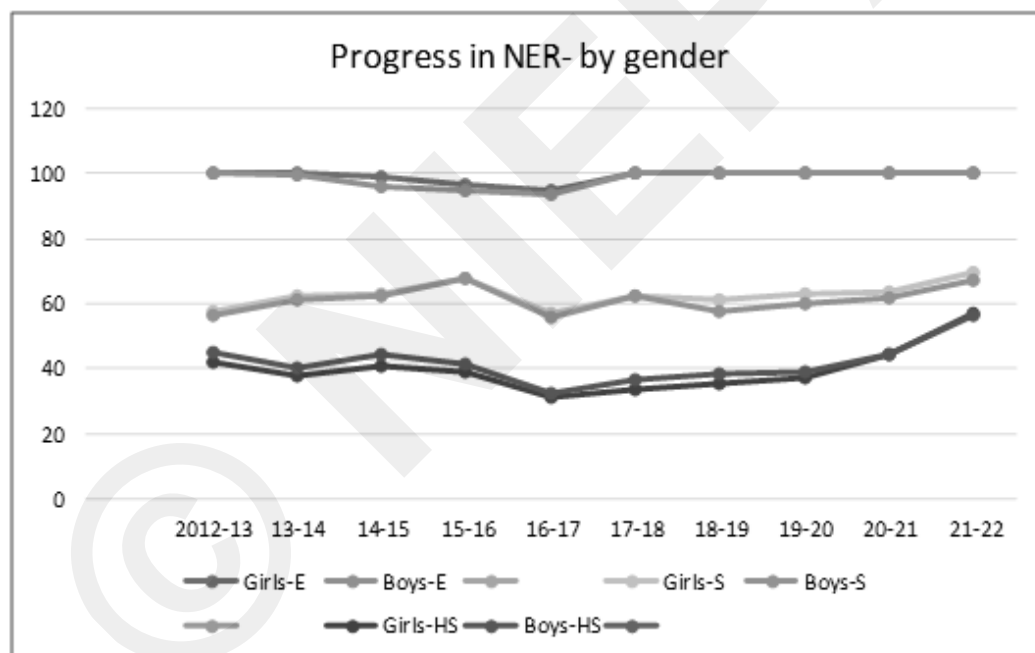
The target for adjusted NER in elementary education as per SDG India index 3.0 is 100. Manipur has an overall score of 100 in 2021-22. The rate which was 100 per cent for both boys and girls in 2012-13 saw a sharp drop in the percentage in 2015-17 although the rate started increasing again.

The NER shows a decreasing trend as the level of education increases. From almost 100 per cent NER for both boys and girls at elementary level, the figure above shows a drastic fall to 60 per cent by secondary level to dip even further to hover between 40-50 per cent at the

higher secondary level for the period of study. The trend does not show much difference between boys and girls at all levels. Although slow progress seems to be made in the rate after the fall at all levels from 2015-16, the rate at which it is rising may not be enough to ensure not only universalisation of education but also the achievement of SDG 4 objectives. The sharp fall in NER across genders as the level of education rises needs to be analysed from whether the demand for education has decreased or whether the provision of education falls as the levels increased.

ASER (Age-Specific Enrolment Ratio)

ASER is the enrolment of a specific single age enrolled, irrespective of the level of education, as a percentage of the population of the same age. A high ASER denotes a high degree of educational participation of the population of an age group. The theoretical maximum value is 100 per cent. An increasing trends can be considered as reflecting the improving participation of the particular age group.

FIGURE 4

ASER: Comparison between Boys and Girls in Different Age Groups
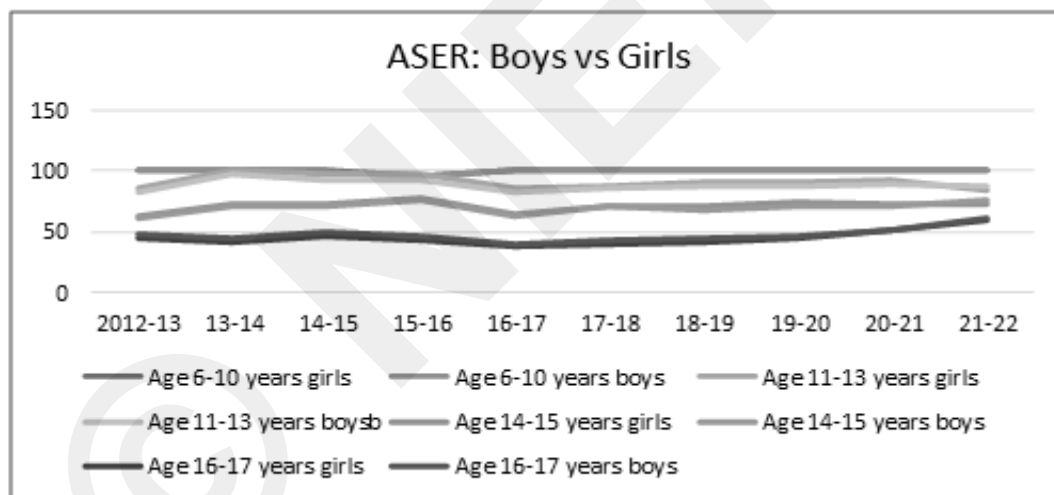
In Manipur there is a drop in ASER with age, i.e., from almost 100 per cent at age 6-10 it has fallen to 40-50 per cent by 16-17 years of age, indicating a huge fall in participation in education as students grow older. There is minor gender disparity in ASER across age groups. The year-on-year trend also does not show a significant change. This results in out of school population at around 50 per cent by the time children should be in higher secondary.

The decline in ASER could also be due to the decrease in the availability of schools at higher levels. This may result in migration for education or drop out for those who cannot migrate (Oinam, 2022). Another factor could be the low promotion and transition rates due to low learning outcomes.

The Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) in higher secondary for Manipur in 2021-22 is 54.2 against a target of 100. The trend over the years has shown an increase for both boys and girls with the girls' GER catching up by 2020. However, the rate continues to hover around 60 which is much lower than the target. This could be due to the prevalence of patriarchal systems or structural and delivery constraints as indicated by earlier studies (Marchang, 2020a, b).

FIGURE 5

GER in Higher Secondary Education and Higher Education
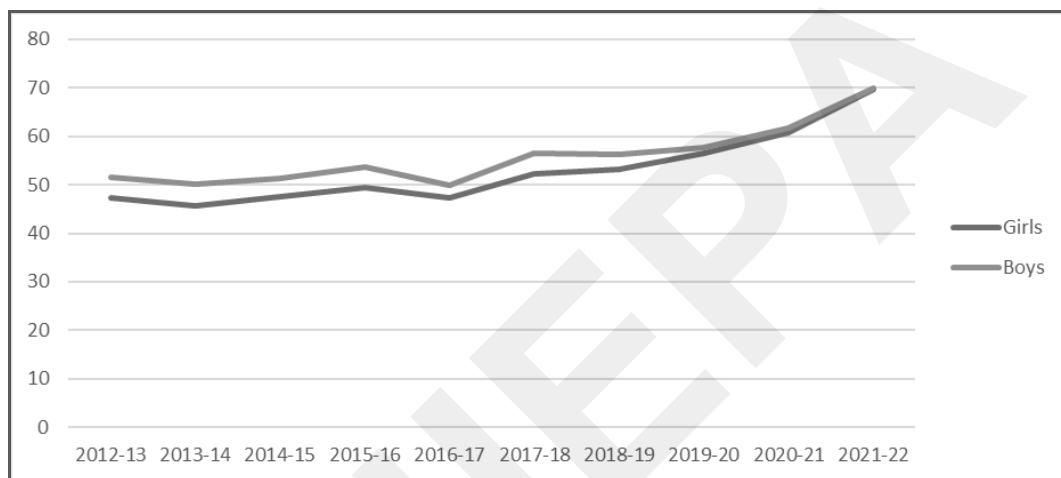
Pupil Teacher Ratio (PTR) is considered as one of the many school-related factors which influences the learning outcome of children. PTR is the number of students who attend a school divided by the number of teachers in the institution. It indicates the extent of individual attention any single child is likely to receive keeping in mind that not all class sizes are going to be same

TABLE 3

Pupil-Teacher Ratio by Level of Education (2018-21)

Year	Primary	Upper Primary	Secondary	Higher Secondary
18-19	14 (27)	11(19)	10(19)	16(27)
19-20	13.2 (26.5)	10.3(18.5)	9.5(18.5)	15.5 (26.1)
20-21	13(26)	10(19)	9(18)	15(26)
21-22	13(26)	13(19)	9(18)	16(27)

Source: UIDSE various reports; All-India ratio within brackets

The table above shows that the PTR for Manipur is better than both the SDG target for PTR (30) and the all-India performance at all levels of education. Within the state the rates have shown marginal improvement year after year.

Out-of-School Children (OSC) in the Age Group 6-14 Years

TABLE 4

Percentage of Children Aged 6-14 not Enrolled in School, by Gender

Year	Manipur			India		
	Boys	Girls	All	Boys	Girls	All
2012	1.3	1.9	1.5	3.1	3.9	3.5
2013	1.4	1.6	1.5	3.1	3.5	3.3
2014	1.5	1.9	1.8	2.9	3.7	3.3
2016	*	*	1.3	*	*	*
2018	1.4	0.9	1.1	*	*	*
2020	5.1	3.2	4.1	*	*	*
2022	16.8	14.1	15.5	*	*	*

Source: ASER

* data not available

The percent of children not currently enrolled has been rising since 2018. According to the 16th Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2021, enrolment of students in government schools has fallen in Manipur from 2018 to 2021. The report further stated that the decline in enrolment in government schools in Manipur has been accompanied by a sharp increase in proportion of children currently not enrolled in the same period (see the table above).

Equity/Inclusion Evaluation through Assessment of Bridging Social Category Gaps in Access to and Participation in Elementary Education

Access and participation at all levels of education is important as it reflects and have implications for the overall socio-economic development of a state. Various barriers can exist beyond the physical barriers such as social and economic barriers. It is important to bridge the gaps that might exist so that the SDG 4 goals are achieved by 2030.

Trends in GPI of GER: The Gender Parity Index (GPI) of Gender Enrolment Rate (GER) is a good measure of socio-economic development of the economy. A higher GPI indicates the possibility of better human capital formation as equal access to education is seen as the first step towards more sustainable development. It gives an indication of other development characteristics and has wider implication on improving the status and capabilities of not just women but also their offspring.

FIGURE 6

Trends in GPI of GER at Different Levels of Education
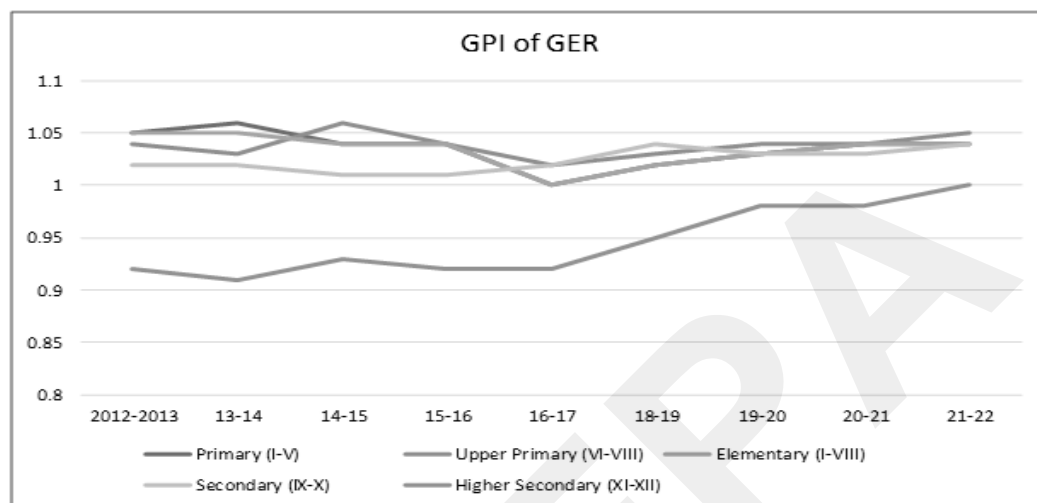
The data for GPI of GER at the elementary level in Manipur show a sharp fall from 2015-16 to 2016-17 but continually rose after that period. As the level of education increase to higher secondary level, the GPI of GER has fallen drastically, although the trends have been seen to improve over time. The fall in GPI at higher levels of education could be due to the defined social norms as well as other constraints on both the provisioning and access which might be gender biased.

Progress towards Universal Retention: Overall Dropout Rate at Different Levels of Education, and Promotion Rate: Many research studies have identified several factors for incidence of dropout. These factors are multifaceted and mostly associated with the family, school, community and psychological levels of each individual child (Mike *et al*, 2008).

It has been documented that children belonging to marginalized sections and of low socio-economic status are more prone to drop out. It is important therefore not just to study the correlation between access to education and dropout incidences but also to understand and highlight the various socio-cultural factors that might affect progress towards retention.

FIGURE 7

Promotion Rate across Social Groups at Primary Level of Education
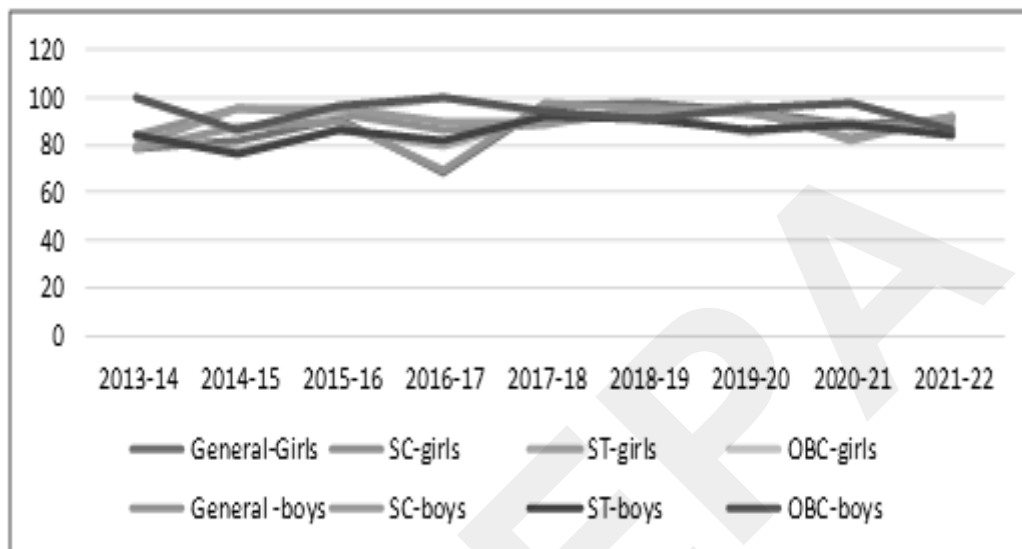
FIGURE 8

Promotion Rate across Social Groups at Upper Primary Level of Education
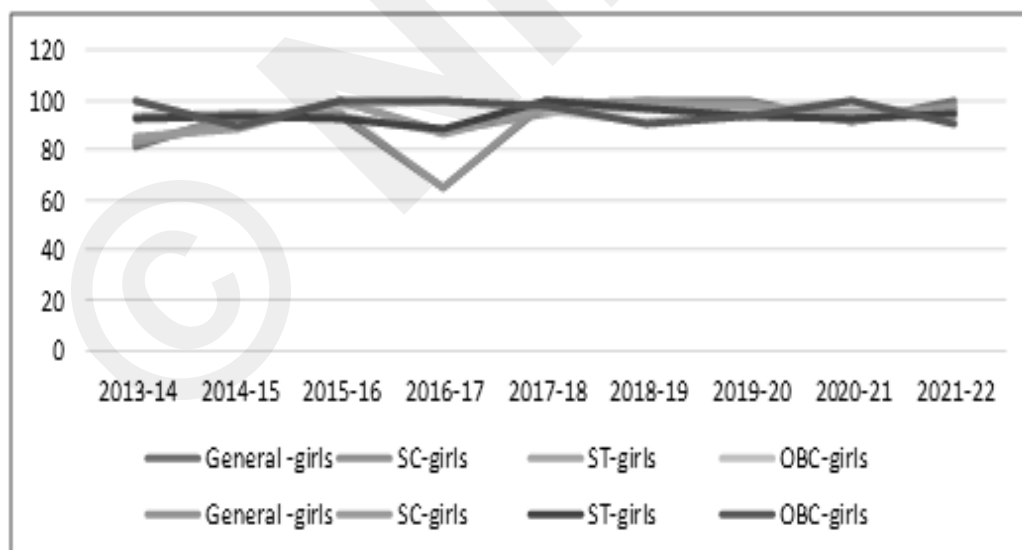
FIGURE 9

Promotion Rate across Social Groups in Secondary Level of Education
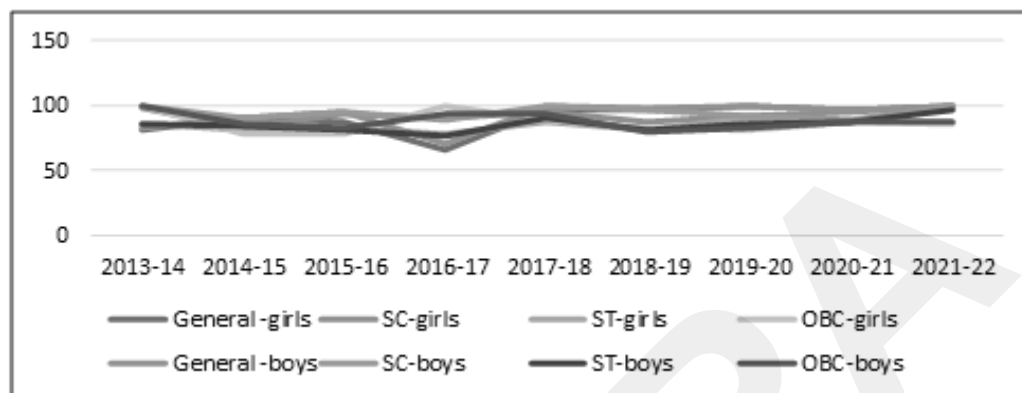
At all levels of schooling, the promotion rate (PR) remains impressive between 80-100 per cent across all categories, except for a sharp variation around 2016-17 for all groups at all levels. The yearly trends show stability for each group except in 2016-17 when it fell sharply especially for both boys and girls of the gender category. In the same year there was a rise in the PR of the OBC category for both genders. At the primary level, in 2020-21 there was a decline in PR for both the general and OBC categories. In the upper primary level, by the last year considered for analysis, OBC category has achieved 100 per cent PR, while there was a drop in the rate for general category in both genders and among SC girls. By the higher secondary level, general category performance was the best for both genders by 2020-21.

Dropout Rate at Different Levels of Education across Social Groups

FIGURE 10

Dropout Rate at Primary Level of Education across Social Groups
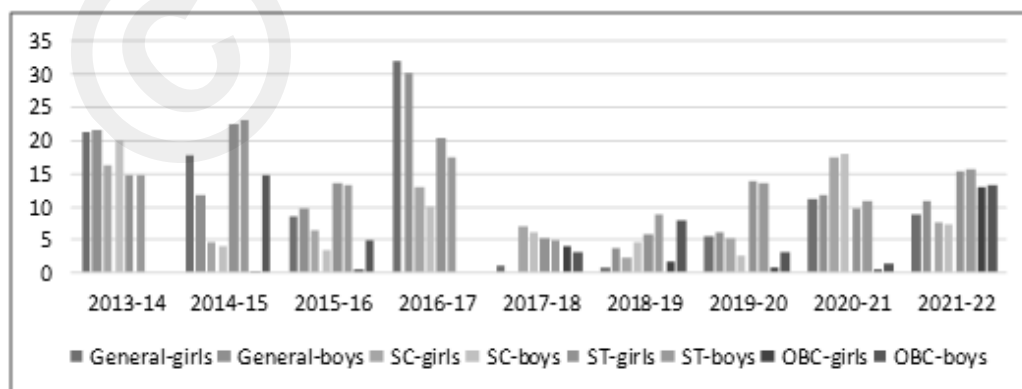
FIGURE 11

Dropout Rate at Upper Primary Level of Education across Social Groups
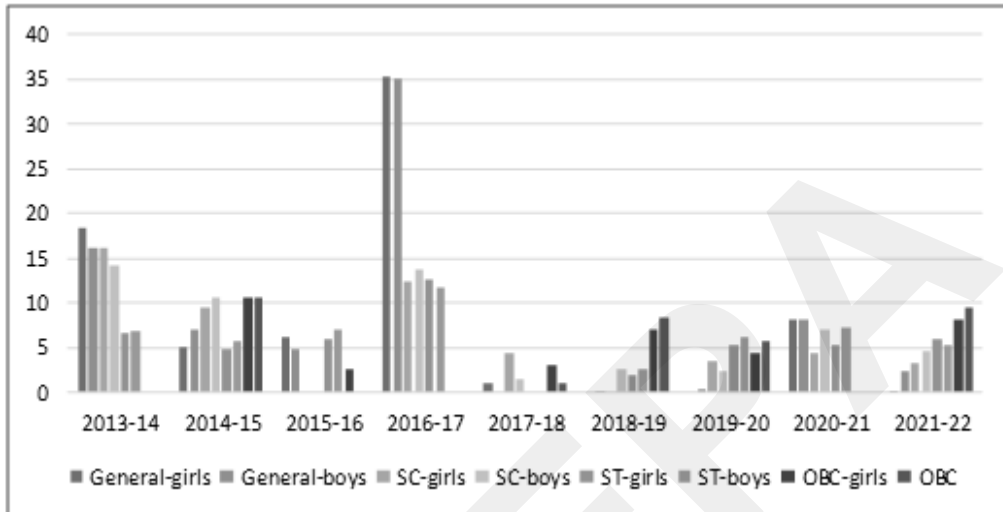
As per the data available, there seem to be only marginal differences among different social groups in the DR from all years studied, except in 2016-17 when the rate was very high for the general category and very low for the OBC for primary, upper primary and secondary levels.

FIGURE 12

Dropout Rate at the Secondary Level of Education across Social Groups
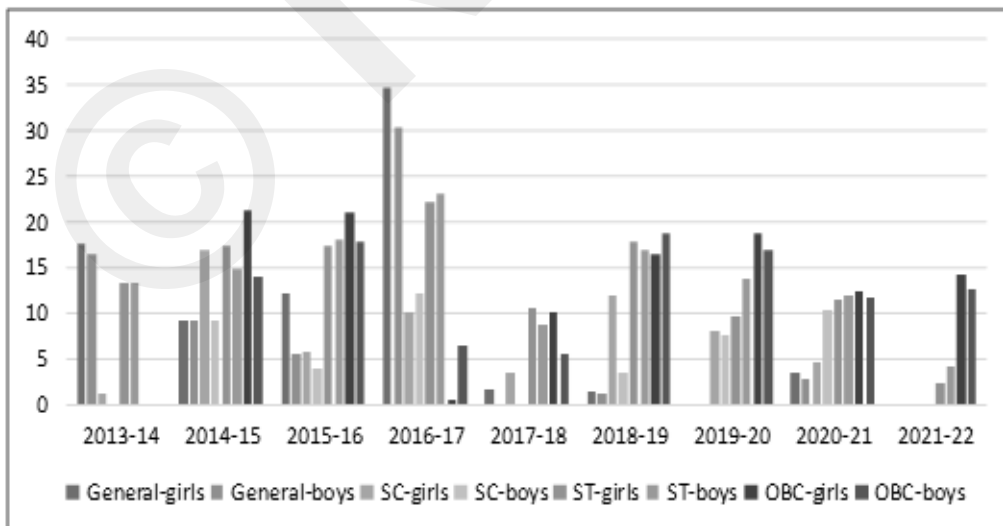
Over the years there is a high fluctuation in drop out (DR) across categories in all levels. Although there is a rise in DR across all categories with higher levels of education, the extent of dropping out of school varies across social categories but only minute gender disparity is seen in the same social group. At all levels and across all groups the dropout rates fell in 2014-15 to sharply rise the following year but to fall again.

At all levels, the DR of the OBC students is the highest in all the years studied, except in 2016-17, with no improvement in performance over the years. At primary school level, the poor performance can be seen with the rate still being very high at around 45 per cent in 2020-21 which was more than 50 per cent in 2013-14. The next highest rate in DR is seen among the ST students.

There is not drastic difference in gender performance across groups. The sharp rise in middle school DR rate among the general category students in 2016-17 can be due to the sharp drop in the promotion rate in the same year.

Although promotion rates are high, the high dropout rates at all levels of schooling across gender and in all social categories remain a cause for concern. As levels of schooling increase, there is an increase in DR across all categories but gender disparity within categories is minimal. The dropout rates are particularly high among the STs and OBCs among the social groups at all levels of education. The trends also do not show much improvement over the years.

Trends in Overall Transition Rates and across Social Groups

The transition rate (TR) in education is the measure of progression in education from one level to the other. It is a good parameter to assess the progress of human capital formation through education. There are many social and economic factors which may influence transition rate and therefore is a good measure of development. A good TR may be the result of good infrastructure, both physical and human resource, of good governance as well as good learning outcomes.

In Manipur the TR from elementary to secondary level shows a fluctuating trend across all categories. Drastic difference in the rate is not observed across social groups from elementary to secondary level. The difference across social categories emerged as levels of education increased which is reflected through the trend in PR and DR. The OBC category shows the worst performance at higher levels of education and the rate shows sharp fluctuations year on year for both genders. The performance of the ST groups shows the most stability at around 80-90 per cent. The TR among students in the general category showed a sharp drop from 2015-16 to 16-17 and rose in 2017-18 and continued to stay at 85-97 per cent.

FIGURE 13

TR across Social Groups from Elementary to Secondary Levels of Education
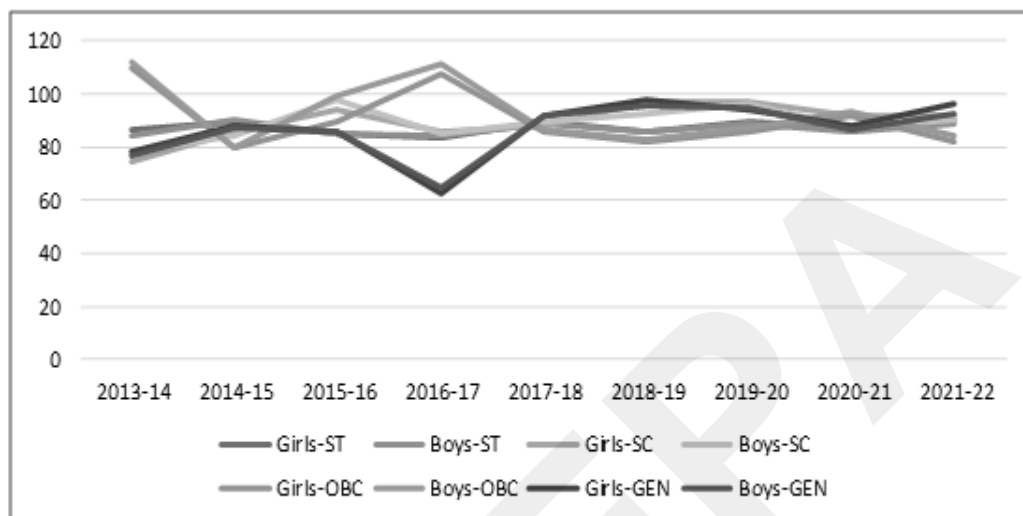
The trend from secondary to higher levels of education show high levels of fluctuation across all groups.

FIGURE 14

TR across Social Groups from Secondary to Higher Secondary Levels of Education
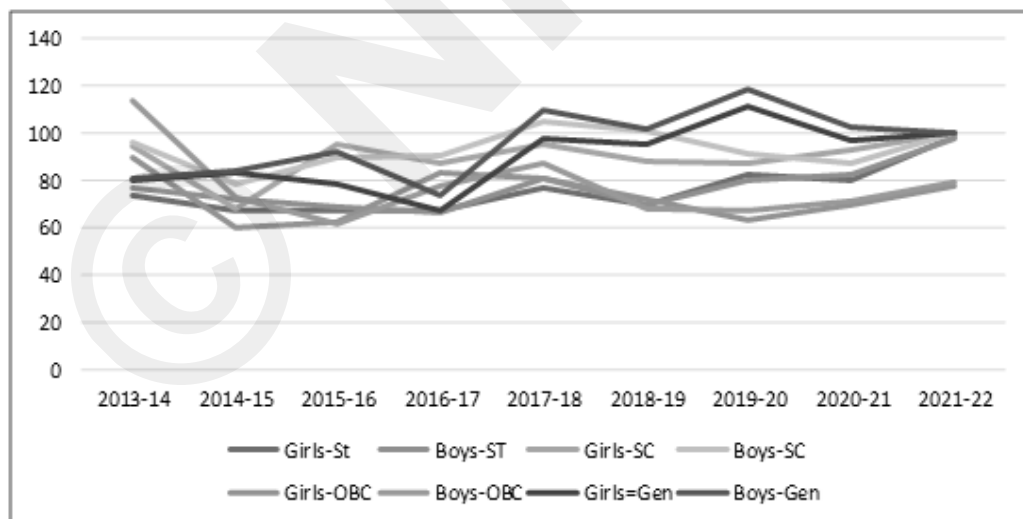
Retention Rate: Retention rate (RT) is a measure of the proportion of students who continue their studies after their first year. It indicates the number of students who successfully completed their programme. The data on RT are available only for three years.

The table shows that the rate at the primary level has improved over the three years, declined in the elementary level for both genders in 2019-20, but remained mostly constant at the secondary level.

TABLE 5

Retention Rate: Comparison by Gender at Different Levels of Education

	Primary			Elementary			Secondary			Higher Secondary		
Year	Boys	Girls	All	Boys	Girls	All	Boys	Girls	All	Boys	Girls	All
17-18	58.76	56.07	57.43	50.98	50.36	50.67	43	41	42			
18-19	69.91	66.07	68	53.36	52.21	52.79	41	41	41			
19-20	73.55	70.95	72.26	49.33	48.84	49.09	42	43	43	33	31	32
21-22	74.1	75.3	74.6	61.3	60.4	60.8	42.5	42.2	42.3	35.8	34.4	35.1

Source: UIDSE (various years)

Excellence Evaluation through Assessment of Learning Outcomes

According to Kaffenberger (2019), "learning profiles depict the progress in average learning outcomes by age or grade in an education system to better understand where an education system succeeds and where it falls short." In the state, only 72.3 per cent of students in grade VIII achieved at least a minimum proficiency level in terms of nationally defined learning outcomes to be attained by the pupils at the end of the grade against a target of 100 per cent, as per the NER SDG index (Niti Ayog, 2022). As per the table given below, the percentage of children in government schools in higher level who are at least able to read Standard II textbooks have remained very low. The year-on-year trend show no drastic improvements across all classes. This could reflect the poor state of public schools and the demand for private schools in the state.

TABLE 6

Percentage of Children in Government Schools Who can at Least Read a Standard II Level Text

Std	2012	2013	2014	2016	2018
II	10.7	8.7	6.3	9.8	7.0
III	21.2	25.2	17.3	21.8	24.5
IV	31.0	43.2	37.0	35.8	45.3
V	47.0	48.2	43.2	64.7	50.6
VI	58.3	51.6	62.3	62.3	58.5
VII	67.4	60.3	66.8	62.2	62.8
VIII	68.2	80.4	72.2	82.4	72.4

Source: ASER (2021)

The World Bank has recently introduced the concept of learning poverty (World Bank, 2019) based on the evidence that 53 per cent of children in low- and middle-income countries are not able to read or understand a simple text by age 10. The ability to read, comprehend and use mathematical tools at the appropriate age have been used as indicators of learning outcome in early-age school going children. These data from government schools in Manipur show the extent of learning poverty that exists in the state.

TABLE 7

Performances on Various Learning Indicators of Children in Standard III (%)

Indicators	2012	2013	2014	2016	2018
Read Std II level	31.2	33.7	34.5	32.2	35.8
Do subtraction	53.5	52.6	59.4	59.7	58.6

Source: ASER (various years)

TABLE 8

Performances on Various Learning Indicators of Children in Standard V (%)

Indicator	2012	2013	2014	2016	2018
Read Std II level	63.6	63.6	66.6	70.7	67.6
Do division	44.7	42.0	54.7	52.5	50.6

Source: ASER (various years)

About 60 per cent of students are lagging behind in reading skills and 40 per cent in mathematical skill formation by Standard III. Both the reading and mathematical skills of Standard V students are much below the expectations with 40-50 per cent of students not acquiring the expected learning outcome of Standard II levels even by the time they are in Standard V. The year-on-year trend shows constancy therefore indicating the lack of improvements in performance over time.

TABLE 9

Learning Outcomes Assessed through Correct Responses to the Subjects (%) for Different Levels

Subject/ Class	Class 3	Class 5	Class 8
Mathematics	68	56	42
EVS	70	61	-
Language	71	59	52
Science	-	-	43
Social science	-	-	42

Source: NAS 2017-18; - data not available

The performance of students seems to deteriorate as we move from class 3 to class 8 in all subjects. The relative performance across social categories and gender for different classes from NAS report in 2017-18 is given below.

Class 3

The performance of girls was either similar to or better than that of boys both at the national level and in Manipur in all 3 subjects. The performance of the general category among the social groups was worse than the national average in all 3 subjects. The Scheduled Tribe (ST) students performed best among all the categories and their performance is better than national average.

Class 5

The performance of girls was again either similar to or better than that of boys both at the national level and in Manipur, in all 3 subjects. In EVS and mathematics, SC students performed better among all social categories while in language ST performed better. ST and SC category students performed better than the national average as well.

Class 8

The performance of girls was again either similar to or better than that of boys both at the national level and in Manipur, in all 4 subjects. ST students performed better than other social categories in all subjects except mathematics (marginally lower) which was still better than national average. OBC and general students performed worse than the national average in all subjects. Except for maths where performance is marginally better, SC category performed badly in all other subjects compared to national level

FIGURE 15

Average Achievements by Class and Subject (in Percentage)
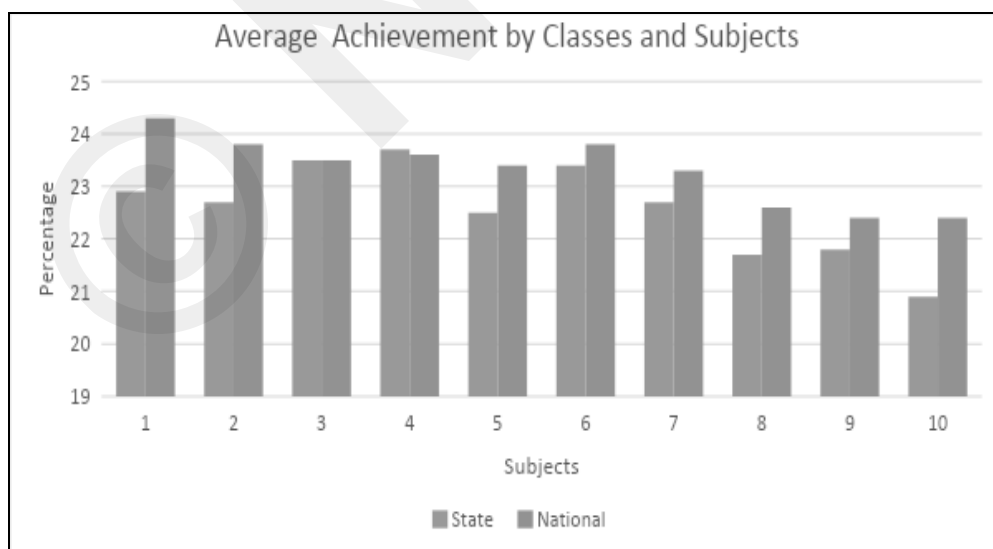
Source: ASER

In classes 3 and 5, Manipur's performance was better than the national average in all subjects. Although it was not significantly different in maths and language, the performance in environmental studies was significantly above the national average.

In class 8, the national average performance is better than the average performance for Manipur in all subjects (though not significantly different) except language where its performance is significantly below the national average.

Approaches to Fostering Quality Education through Assessment of Infrastructure, Availability, and Qualification of Teachers

Trends in Growth of Schooling Facilities

TABLE 10

Number of Primary Schools, Schools Imparting Upper Primary Education and Schools Imparting Elementary Education

Year	Total	Primary	Upper Primary	Secondary	Higher Secondary
12-13	4772	3072	759	775	166
13-14	4811	3093	767	782	169
14-15	4974	3266	757	781	170
15-16	4993	3259	762	788	184
16-17	4978	3263	758	777	180
17-18	4812	2566	1089	920	237
18-19	4844	2600	1084	914	246
19-20	4663	2341	1046	939	247
20-21	4563	2426	1013	961	253
21-22	4617	2422	966	958	271

Source: UIDSE (various years)

FIGURE 16

Number of Schools at Different Levels across the Years
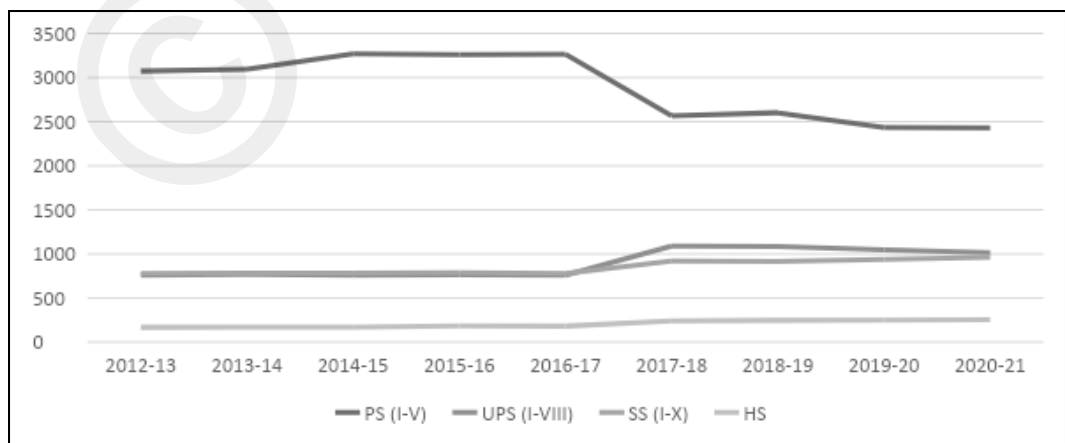
The trend in availability of schooling facilities indicates that there is a drastic fall in the number of primary schools from 2017-18. This huge decline in the number of primary schools from 2016-17 to 2017-18 is noteworthy. However, 2017-18 saw a massive increase in the number of schools at all three levels above primary, i.e., the upper primary, secondary, and higher secondary levels. This trend remained stable in the subsequent years as well. The drastic difference in the number of schools between primary and upper primary levels and again from secondary and higher secondary is concerning. This could result in students dropping out and discontinuing education at higher levels. The fall in NER and ASER in higher levels discussed earlier could also be a result of the fall in availability of schools for higher levels. Although the trend in the extent of availability of both physical and human resources infrastructure has not been discussed in this paper, a glimpse of it is available in the latest report in NER (shown in Tables 1 and 2 above).

Discussion

The present study on the educational performance of Manipur shows that there can be many factors which may be a hindrance to the progress towards universalisation of elementary education as well as on the human capital formation of the economy. These include the low GER of 54.2 per cent against a target of 100 in 2021-22 and the sharp fall in NER as the level of education increases. This has led to a rise in this rate of out-of-school children since 2018, with the out-of-school population numbering around 50 per cent by the time children should be in higher secondary. These factors are also related to the low proportion of children being promoted and retained at all levels and falling as levels of education increased and thus decreasing the transition rate (TR) as levels of education rises. All these factors may act as a hindrance to achieving the SDG 4 objectives by 2030.

According to ASER 2021, enrolment of students in government schools in Manipur has fallen from 26.8 per cent in 2018 to 13.4 per cent in 2021 and the decline in enrolment in government school has been accompanied by a sharp increase in proportion of children currently not enrolled, from 1.1 per cent in 2018 to 15.5 per cent in 2021. One of the important reasons for the sharp increase in out of school children could be the pandemic. Although the pupil teacher ratio is better than the all-India performance, there is a high incidence of teachers' absenteeism, lack of infrastructure, etc, which has led to a high rate of dropout among other things (Rahaman & Das, 2018). The commendable performance in higher enrolment at the primary levels across all groups is not sustained in the higher levels. The high enrolment rate at primary level could be the result of the Right to Education and other government schemes such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan which makes provision for universal access to elementary education for all children aged 6-14.

Manipur has performed much better than most states in India seen through its focus of equity and inclusion resulting in bridging the gender gaps in participation in education. The GPI of GER and other indicators of access show a remarkable gender parity.

In the state, although there have been significant achievements in gender parity in various aspects of education, there does not seem to be huge progress made at the *lower* levels of education in other aspects during the past decade. Although progress has also been made in the expansion of education by the rise in the number of primary schools, the increase in the number of private schools could be an indication of the poor performance of the government schools, which is supported by evidence of the poor learning outcomes in

the government schools. The gaps in the performance in all parameters between rural Manipur and urban Manipur is a cause for concern. This might increase the inequality gap in the state especially the rural-urban, so-called hill-valley divide as well as the gaps across the social and religious groups.

The performance gap also exists in comparison across social categories. The much better performance of the so-called marginalised class (SC/ST) in the learning outcome indicators is noteworthy considering their poor performance in PR and high DR. This is despite the infrastructure constraints in those districts which have a higher concentration of SC/ST population. The state's policy makers need to recognise the right of every individual to education without discrimination on any grounds and giving priority to education of the excluded, vulnerable, under-served and other disadvantaged groups. Ensuring that educational opportunities are available for and accessible to all segments of the society should be accorded topmost priority.

The education system still faces several challenges as it seeks to further enhance access to and quality of education at all levels of education. The relatively higher dropout rates and unsatisfactory student learning levels continue to cause concern. Despite significant accomplishments, the slow progress in reducing the number of non-literates continues to be a concern. The state needs to take a serious step to improve access and work towards higher enrolment especially in higher education.

Another challenge is the spatial distribution of the availability of educational institutions. The state sees a large concentration of schools and educational institutions in urban locations and district headquarters with heavy clustering of private schools in certain compact areas (Marchang, 2020a, b). Many studies have shown the effect of distance to school from the place of residence as crucial for schooling of children (Dutta, 2012; Mike *et al*, 2007; Chugh, 2011; Colclough *et al*, 2000; Ainsworth *et al*, 2005).

Many studies have highlighted the strong negative linkages of the impact of conflict and education sector in Manipur which adversely affect students' academic life (Karam & Somokanta 2016; Shimray and Devi, 2009). The high dropout rate, low retention rate especially with progressive education levels and the low enrolment rate could be the effect of conflict-related activities with Manipur being a conflict-ridden state of India. This can also act as one of the many barriers to achievement of SDG 4 objectives.

The ability of the state to meet the objectives of SDG 4 and address the challenges facing the education sector will depend heavily on the will and determination of the government. The broad constraints will be around resource availability such as the need for maintaining a level of financial, material, and human resources that are required to support both expansion and qualitative improvement of education at all levels and the utilization of the existing/available financial and human resources more efficiently. Good governance and accountability structure need to be strengthened so that good policies and objectives do not suffer poor implementation.

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Web Resources

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http://www.epao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=leisure.EI.Oinam_Anand.Migration_of_students_from Manipur

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School Complexes in India: Mapping Models in Diverse Contexts

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Abstract

A school complex is a viable mechanism of rationalising human and physical resources in the schools within a geographical area, and is therefore seen as a major policy concern in India. The Indian Education Commission 1964-66, the National Policy on Education 1986 and, further, the National Education Policy 2020 highly supported the recommendation for formation of school complexes in the country. NEP 2020 outlines a school complex not only for effective school governance and resource sharing but also as a vital mechanism of bringing vibrancy in the schools and the system. The policy recognises the importance of functioning of a complex or cluster as an academic semi-autonomous unit of the State Department of Education. The administrative, academic and financial challenges make the implementation of school complexes highly contested as it requires application of multiple models in a diverse Indian school setting. Against this background, the present paper attempts to capture a paradigm shift in the emerging scenario, strategize on what works through proposed workable models in differential contexts while deriving a futuristic perspective on school complexes in the country.

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Introduction

The announcement of National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 renewed the focus on school complex to address the issues of equitable access and educational opportunities for ensuring quality concerns. Historically, Education Commission (1964-66) and subsequently Janardhan Reddy Committee (1992) recognised school complexes as a feasible structure for school improvement. The NEP 2020 also gave an impetus to the idea of school complexes which are more focussed on improving the quality of education in the context of increased accessibility to schools, flexible school governance, strategic resource sharing and community participation. The research data, centering on actual implementation of school complexes across several Indian states, have reported that the administrative, academic and financial challenges with their own regulatory structures, multilevel actors and coordination made the implementation of school complexes a highly contested area (Diwan et al, 2022).

Therefore, this article makes an attempt to examine the feasibility and viability of implementing school complexes as a governance structure so as to attain quality and equitable education in the country's diverse school setting in the context of NEP, 2020. It addresses some key questions in order to inform policy and narratives on the subject: (i) Does school complex as envisioned by NEP 2020 promise equal access to quality education for all? (ii) What are the enablers and constraints in the current educational system for its implementation? (iii) Can school complexes function as a viable mechanism of rationalising human and physical resources in the schools within a particular geographical area? (iv) Considering the hugely diverse school education context in India, can there be a single standard workable model of a school complex? Against this background, this article critically reviews the existing practices and challenges of establishing school complexes in a contextually diverse Indian school setting under different themes such as administration, academic, finance and leadership. The article further argues for the need of a differentiated approach in perceiving school complexes by adopting a localised lens for planning and management. While maintaining that there is a need of multiple context -sensitive workable models of school complexes in diverse settings, the article suggests workable models for the effective functioning of school complexes in challenging geographical contexts so as to inform policy decisions and implementation.

A Review of Education Policies on School Complexes

Recognising the importance of improving educational standards across all levels of schooling, the Education Commission (1964-66) recommended the establishment of a network of schools as a complex within easily accessible distances. Under the plan, the school complex may comprise of a group of primary and upper primary schools within a radius of 5-10 miles attached to a high school, a training school, a technical school, etc. This would facilitate in providing equal opportunities of access and sharing of educational facilities and experiences among all the schools. Following this, the National Policy on Education (NPE) (1986) reiterated the idea of setting up a school complex, but confined the plan to bringing schools together to share and exchange resources and staff without establishing specific directions on the autonomy of the school complex in a decentralised governance setting. Finally, the CABE Committee Report on *Decentralised Management of*

Education (1993: 43) recommended 'Educational Complexes' as autonomous registered societies.

The Programme of Action (POA) (1992) for implementation of NPE 1986 viewed the concept of educational structures within the framework of local area planning. The report of Janardhan Reddy Committee in 1992 brought to the fore the element of 'autonomy' of school complexes within the decentralised governance system of the education system. The Committee visualised school complexes to work in close collaboration with the education department of the state at block and district level; the local bodies, *panchayati raj* institutions, local development and social welfare agencies and the institutes of higher and technical education.

After the NPE (1986) and POA (1992), several efforts were made to establish different models of school networks/complexes across the country. One such model named Sahodaya School Complex was conceptualised by the Central Board of School Education in the year 1987 under the premise 'Freedom to Learn; Freedom to Grow.' Further, several attempts have been made to establish cluster level institutions under various programmes. These include school complexes established in Maharashtra after implementation of NPE (1968), teachers' centres established in Andhra Pradesh under Andhra Pradesh Primary Education Project (APPEP) and Cluster Resource Centres (CRCS) established under District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) and Sarva Shisha Abhiyan (SSA) in various districts and states.

At present, the NEP 2020 strongly endorses the idea of school complexes to ensure universal access, participation and quality of education under the broad agenda of providing equitable and quality education in schools. NEP 2020 visualises the school complex as an integrated semi-autonomous unit for improving accessibility, effective school governance, resource sharing and community participation.

Global Scenario of School Complexes

The school cluster designed as an administrative grouping of schools in close geographic proximity for educational purposes has been quite prominent in Latin America, such as Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, and Peru and has taken roots in other continents as well such as Burma (now Myanmar), India, Nigeria, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka (Bray, 1987). In Latin America, clusters are usually called *nucleos*. Other names include *complexes, zones* and *school learning cells*. Some school clusters include only primary schools, for example in Papua New Guinea, while in other countries, it is integrated with primary and secondary schools like in Sri Lanka, India, Peru, and Costa Rica. Clusters differ also in terms of geographic coverage. In Thailand and Sri Lanka, all schools are required by law to belong to a cluster; in Colombia and Guatemala, clusters have been introduced as part of initiatives for disadvantaged areas. In a few parts of India, cluster programmes have covered only schools that have chosen to join. At the same time, the size of the cluster also varies. In Thailand, 7-10 schools make up a cluster; in the Indian state of Rajasthan, school complexes contain up to 5 secondary schools and up to 25 primary schools (Wheeler *et al*, 1992).

Ribchster and Edwards (1998: 282) defined clusters from the perspective of small schools, wherein clusters consisted of proximate schools which work together and cooperate for events and activities for the mutual benefit of each of the participating institutions with

the prime objective of enhancing the learning experience of pupils attending small schools. Bell & Sigsworth (1991: 25) highlights that clustering has been 'eagerly embraced' by the proponents of small-school education. According to Busher and Hodgkinson (1996), in the UK, the National Curriculum had encouraged schools and Local Education Administration (LEA) to encourage formation of *families* in schools which is composed of a secondary school and its main feeder primary schools. In such arrangements that were called 'families', similar terms such as '*development groups'* (Benford, 1988) and '*federation*' and '*clusters'* were used.

Another term used for clusters are *cooperative schools*, and studies by Swaffield and Major (2019) highlighted the growth of cooperative schools in England, established with the intention of allowing greater freedom and opening possibilities for different governance structures. The study by Woodin (2019) emphasised the representation of cooperative schools to democratise education in which pupils, parents and communities are active partners in schools and education networks. The study emphasised that cooperative schools hold high the principles of democracy and equity, while ensuring multi-stakeholder governance in which staff, pupils, parents and communities play a significant role.

Research studies also revealed that schools come together to function as *networks*. Hadfield *et al* (2006: 5) defined network as "*groups or systems of interconnected people and organisations (including schools) whose aims and purposes include the improvement of learning and aspects of well-being known to affect learning.*" Networks are characterised by increasing decentralisation, privatisation, and collaboration between government agencies, and between government and the private sector.

Research studies have focussed on the importance of clustering for effective governance of small schools. Ribchester and Edwards (1998) highlighted that clustering is significant for small primary schools, especially in rural areas, as it is a significant local coping strategy for small schools in rural areas. Among the many advantages of clustering for schools, Gloucesterchire County Council (1998) highlighted the advantages of clustering in curriculum and staff development while Warwickshire County Council (1992) concluded that clustering can relieve some of the problems of isolation. Mujis, West and Ainscow (2010) highlighted that collaboration between schools will help to provide a full service to pupils, address the social, health, and psychological needs of pupils in ways that would not be possible for individual schools. Schools can also network to save material and staff costs (Nooteboom, 2004) or for the provision of more effective and scalable Continuing Professional Development (CPD) activities (Hadfield, 2005). Galaskiewicz (1985) defined four goals of inter-organisational cooperation: acquire resources, reduce uncertainty, enhance legitimacy, and attain collective goals. Ribchester and Edwards (1998) presented a comprehensive picture of the advantages and disadvantages of clustering schools. The advantages identified by the study included improving learning of students, avail larger resource base, discussion opportunities with larger staff peer group and improved teacher development support. The disadvantages include loss of school autonomy and lack of coordination between individual school needs and cluster needs, Mujis, West and Ainscow (2010) reveals that the benefits of clustering include increased professional development opportunities with gains in teacher knowledge, emergence of a learning culture, increased parental involvement, focussed attention on achievement of targeted groups such as pupils at risk or pupils with special educational needs.

The empirical research evidences, a few of them named here, articulated the need for establishing school complexes because of the benefits derived for improving student learning. Chapman & Allen (2005) suggest that networked learning can forge relationships across previously isolated schools. Datnow *et al* (2003) and Harris *et al* (2006) showed school networks to be an effective means of sharing good practices and organising the continuous professional development for teachers. Ainscow *et al* (2005) report that collaboration leads to teachers viewing disadvantaged pupils in new ways.

Among studies on the functions performed by school clusters, Galton *et al* (1991) identified that clusters were involved in the in-service training of teachers; organising workshops focussing around varying curriculum theme, bringing children together from separate schools for exchange of ideas, organisation of joint visits/sports; the sharing of equipment and facilities; joint purchases of resources or staff expertise through the identification of common cluster needs and, finally exchange of teaching staff. Busher and Hodgkinson (1996) revealed that interschool collaboration can include curriculum/staff development networks, organisational/administrative networks and policy making networks. The study revealed that among the many challenges, one main challenge was the schools wanting to maintain their autonomy within their clusters. Secondly, there were tensions between secondary schools and primary schools within a cluster related to funding issues and dependence of primary schools on secondary schools for resources and staff.

Leadership roles, challenges and its impact on school clusters have also been studied for example, Busher and Hodgkinson (1996) revealed that school heads and teachers were the most important source of leadership for a school cluster. The role included chairing the key committee meetings, coordinating curriculum development and staff development networks, implement policies and practices after understanding the needs of the local communities. Swaffield and Major (2019) examined leadership in a cluster of eight schools in England and concluded that leadership challenges can arise in establishing values such as democracy, equality, equity, social responsibility and caring for others.

Networking has been promoted as a powerful tool for leadership learning and leadership performance (Bush 2010; Chapman 2008; Hadfield & Chapman 2009) and a useful 'approach to achieving change' (Townsend 2010: 256). Networking is regarded as an important factor in all aspects of leadership development (Bush, 2008), an opportunity for building leadership capacity (Hadfield and Chapman 2009) and has scope for distributed practice of leadership (Townsend, 2010). Riggins-Newby (2004) elaborates on the importance of networking by pointing out that networking provides scope to break out of old patterns to create ways of doing things that are better fitted to the present and its needs. Networking provides space for principals to pool their experiences, knowledge, wisdom and especially their strong motivation to improve the lives of the learners entrusted to them. Barnett *et al* (2000) highlights that networking ensures maximum adult learning and shared authority for learning, opportunities for collaboration, and teamwork in practice-oriented situations. Networks have also been cited as a form of professional development in conjunction with training, on-site processes, and professional development in schools (McCormick et al. 2011; Reitzug 2002) while Lieberman and Grolnick (1996: 8) also found networks to have a number of positive effects on educators' professional development where they form strong links with one another. Within the South African context, the study by Mathibe (2007) observed that principals find themselves isolated and alone in the school situation in most times. Networks are ideal spaces where principals can discuss matters of

common interest. Networking has also been noted to have an effect on pupil learning. For example, studies by Pernell and Firestone (1996), Akkerman, Torenvlied, and Van den Bekerom's (2010) reported significant improvement on student learning due to networking.

Among the many challenges faced by cluster schools, Deborah (2019) revealed that cooperative schools face tensions at it sets out to promote mutualisation, not privatisation; to promote 'we' rather than 'me.' The study reveals the issues faced as a cooperative school as it seeks to enact *thicker*, 'collective forms' of democratic engagement. Munawarah, Yusrizal & Usman (2020) studied clustering in elementary school cluster in Indonesia and identified that the obstacles to networking are lack of funds, time and means, teachers who lack ICT mastery, low interest teachers in reading and developing teaching materials. Shikalepo (2018), in a study of school clusters in Oshikoto region of Namibia, established that while the implementation of school cluster system was a positive move towards decentralisation and sharing of resources between schools, the system did not have a legal policy framework to regulate the system operations. Chikoko (2007) studied the perceptions of Zimbabwean teachers and school heads on implementing school cluster system as an innovation. Key challenges included the centralisation tendency of the education system, resistance to change and the under-utilisation of resources.

Review of literature reveals that school complexes have a high influence on student development, teacher professional development by following principles of collaboration, networking and good leadership. School complexes also improve the positive culture in schools by providing opportunities for collaborative learning. At the same time challenges to establishing school complexes include lack of funds, challenges to autonomy, administrative issues in merging of schools and governance issues. Within this global scenario, the following paragraphs discuss the education scenario in India and locate the need for establishment school complexes within the school education scenario.

Scope and Methodology

This paper attempts to provide a realistic picture of the functioning of school complexes in the country. It identifies outstanding questions related to functioning of the school complexes, while arguing the need for a realistic plan that addresses various parameters linked to learning within complexes that includes administrative, academic, financial and leadership domains. The paper calls for contextually sensitive approaches to school complexes development through deriving context-specific workable models. The study uses secondary as well as primary data resources based on the experiences of the sample of field practitioners, obtained through workshop and Google forms. The suggestions and the models of school complexes were developed on the existing practices and what may be practical in the specific contexts.

Making School Complex a Reality: Anticipated Hurdles and Mapping Possibilities

The following paragraphs discuss the challenges at the administrative, academic, leadership and financial level in the implementation of school complexes.

(i) Administrative Challenges

a. *Spatial Concerns*: In spatial context, multiple sites pose multiple barriers. In a particular location, it would be challenging to bring all schools in the ambit of one complex and arrange to cater to each student within a radius of 10 to 12 kilometre, mainly due to factors not in control of school authorities like difficulties in accessibility. There could be hurdles such as lack of roads, difficult terrains, geographically challenging contexts such as hilly regions, remote and rural areas, flood prone areas, or any other natural calamity zones. This indicates to the need for flexible models for executing the school complex plan and the clustering of schools.

There may be locations that might call for highly specialised inter-sectoral approaches for implementing the school complex plan. There is a need for flexible norms in parameters such as the enrolment of children per schools within the complex (the total number of children per cluster is mentioned as 3000 in NEP 2020) and also with respect to the distance between schools in the complex (the NEP 2020 proposes that schools must be within a 5-8 km radius, and the number of schools per cluster be restricted to 15). As per the norms for establishing a school complex, it is necessary to have 20 -30 teachers in each complex. A group of 20 to 30 teachers in one cluster may be difficult in far flung, remote rural locations. The number of children enrolled in remote schools may also be less because of the varying density of population between regions.

b. *Recruitment of Teachers in SEZs:* The socio-economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs) face exclusion and isolation due to gender identities, socio-economic identities, geographical identities, disabilities and socio-cultural identities. School complexes provides scope for establishment of special education zones (SEZs) which would then call for coordinated efforts on the part of the school and stakeholders to ensure access, inclusive and quality education for the disadvantaged and marginalised children. At present, such areas face challenges of shortage of subject teachers. In the present situation, to compensate for the lack of subject teachers, teachers teach multiple subjects other than the one they are qualified in. It would require a highly skilled leadership competence to network with community and find local experts to teach the children. Schools in border areas also have children speaking multiple languages in classrooms, which may be different from the language spoken by the teachers. The school heads may need to network with local community, School complex management committee and with the education department to find local teachers with teaching expertise. School heads need to be provided autonomy for recruitment of local teachers who are competent to teach subject in local language. Standardised and mandatory norms of the education system, insisting on recruitment of teachers who have qualified the Teacher Eligibility Test (TET) for the schools in an SEZ may need to be revised so as to ensure children learning in disadvantaged schools. Further, the pupil- teacher ratio in schools in disadvantaged zones may not abide to the stipulated RTE-2009 norms. In the present circumstances, states may have to deal with the limitation of financial provisions to initiate fresh teacher appointments. The situation also calls for system administrators and practitioners to make a realistic plan on availability of teachers

appropriate and suitable for a particular place and then map transfers and deployment to a school cluster depending on requirements.

c. *Governance under Different Management:* With reference to the administrative structures or governance mechanisms there might be a lack of coordination among all types of managements in the school complex. In tribal areas, for example, majority schools are managed by Tribal Welfare Department under Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA). At the same time a large sector of schools is owned by the State Department of Education, while the third category of schools fall under the purview of private management and so on. The school complex as envisioned by the policy would call for coordinated efforts for charting out a feasible school complex development plan (SCDP) for participation of all management structures for ensuring effective planning and monitoring mechanisms. Further, making the private schools a part of the school complex requires the preparation of a clear action plan for translating it at the ground level. It is also possible that schools with advanced infrastructural facilities may not be willing to cooperate, despite being a part of the school complex. Further states such as Assam, Himachal Pradesh and Telangana, have reported different administrative structures for the primary, upper primary and secondary level of government schools, suggesting the need for major revision of administrative and governance norms while clubbing schools across levels within a complex. Guidelines on the roles and responsibilities of individual staff, the number of meetings within the school complexes, agenda of the meetings, development of school development plan and school complex development plan needs to be provided. Guidelines should also include the ways/processes to facilitate coordination for sharing available resources across the cluster, especially by supporting institutions existing in the state, district, block and cluster.

(ii) Academic Issues

There is an urgent need for school complexes to shift from being an administrative unit to an academic unit to achieve improvement in student learning outcomes. Some of the roles envisaged for school complexes as an academic unit includes dealing with issues of drop out and out of school children, resolve issues related to pedagogy and content delivery; sharing of best teaching and leadership practices within and across school complexes; identify and solve learning related challenges among children; sensitising teachers and other stakeholders to uphold values such as inclusivity and equity for quality education. With the NEP 2020 mandating 50 hours CPD for teachers and school heads every year, there is a need for planning, highly specialised context-specific, practitioner centric professional development programmes for teachers and school heads with provisions to follow up, review and on-site mentoring arrangements. The Cluster Resource Centres, established under the DPEP and SSA, are still functional in the states. The cluster resource coordinators need to work closely with the school complex heads and the principals of satellite schools in performing functions such as monthly school visits to provide on-site academic support, training of teachers, engage with school complex development planning, data management and strategic utilisation of resources.

(iii) *Leadership in School Complexes*

Leadership within a school complex is envisioned at different levels — right from foundational to secondary education, largely led by the School Complex Head with support from the School Complex Management Committee (SCMC). In such an arrangement, the possibilities of delegation of powers /responsibilities and shared decision making becomes more as a right and also the root cause of conflicts. The school complex Head should be competent to lead not just the administrative aspects of the school complex, but should be adept at dealing with academic challenges also. The school head would need to be facilitator, coordinator, and open to new ideas in order to make the school complex a vibrant learning organisation. The school complex head should also practise succession leadership so as to develop teacher leaders competent to lead schools as instructional leaders. The NEP 2020 recommends constitution of School Complex Management Committee comprising: School heads of each school in the school complex; Representative teacher from each school; Members of the community; *Panchayat*/village council member; Parent representative from each school; NGOs in the community; School heads and members of SCMC along with the system administrators at the cluster, block and district levels. There is a need to redefine roles and responsibilities to make a complex function effectively, reinforcing collective thinking and collaborative effort for complex mapping, planning and monitoring mechanisms.

(iv) Financial Issues

The challenge of establishment of resource-rich school complexes across the country would also entail state governments to develop work out details on financial implications and chart out a budget for provision of adequate resources, a plan for resource generation and mobilisation of resources from different sources within the financial norms and jurisdictions. High quality infrastructure, facilities for curricular activities with focussed attention on activities enhancing quality education and learning outcomes in schools and creation of physical spaces and human resources for co-curricular activities as envisioned in the NEP 2020, which also includes high-quality national residential summer programmes for secondary school students in various subjects etc, teacher salaries from multiple disciplines and specialisations, etc. Ensuring a set aside budget and timely release for handling day to day issues related with transportation, providing facilities at one central part of the cluster, tapping local resources etc is a task where energy and time needs to be invested coupled with seriousness and dedication, which may not be an easy proposition.

Suggestive Models of School Complex for Diverse Contexts

NPE 1986 introduced the concept of school complexes, which was adopted in many states. This section illustrates the models which are existing in the states of Himachal Pradesh and Maharashtra in particular, though there have been other models as well that existed in other states as well like Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, etc.

In the context of Himachal Pradesh, one suggested model is to include the government schools, the *Anganwadis*, the training schools, DIETS, BRC and/or BEO and willing private schools as part of the school complex. Sufficient care should be taken to check the distance amongst schools and between the nodal schools not exceeding 5-10 kilometres in any case.

FIGURE 1

An Illustrative Model of School Complexes for Himachal Pradesh
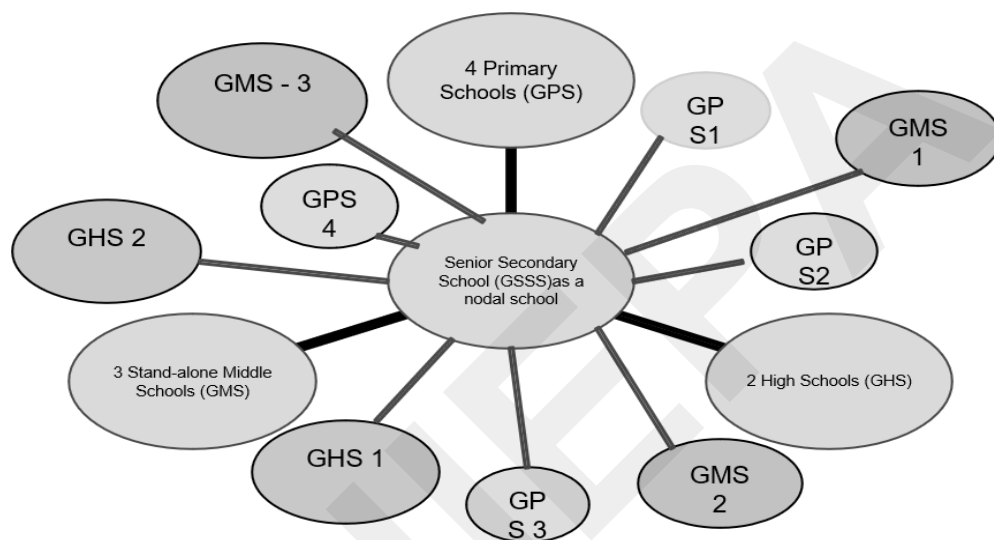
Depending upon resource availability, different schools within the complex may be developed as a resource hub based on a particular theme. For example, if one school is more focused on sports, another may be on dance/music.

The geographic regions in Maharashtra portray diversity and different contexts in which schools are located. The challenges and complexities for a school leader to manage resources while at the same time addressing the educational needs of children around are peculiar which resulted in multiple models that suit the varying local contexts of school complexes. A few such models have been discussed in the following section.

Central Secondary School as Lead

In this model, School 1 is the central secondary school, and other schools are connected to it for administrative aspects and resources. School 1, which should function as a lead school, has all the resources. School 2 and 3 can be envisioned as twin feeder schools, and therefore sharing of resources and activities can be planned according to a suitable schedule in consultation with the lead school. This is the simplest arrangement of a school complex between two schools.

FIGURE 2

Model for a School Complex with One Lead School
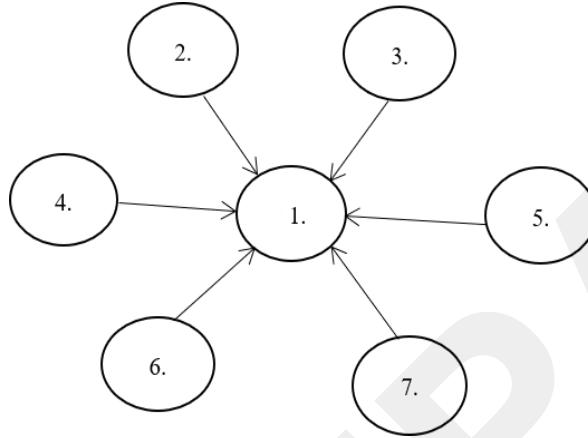
Complex with Dual Lead Schools and a Web of Schools

The model is already functional in the Cluster Resource Centres (CRC), where a primary school is located with two secondary schools in a nearby area. Among these two secondary schools, administrative and academic responsibilities are shared. In case even if one of the central schools lacks particular resources, those can be complemented by others. Further, it can facilitate ease of access and resource sharing effectively.

FIGURE 3

Model for Dual Schools in Lead
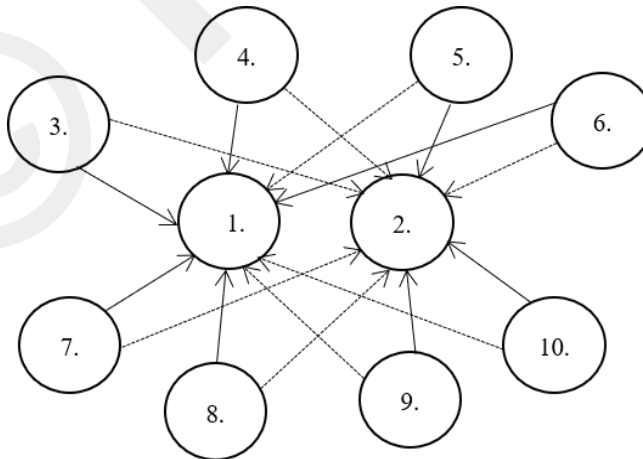
Branching out the Schools

In the remote and hard-to-reach locations of Maharashtra, the model seen to be workable is a central school connected to feeder schools. The central school is connected to one school, which is the locus of other schools, as it connects to other schools in a specific geographical area. The shortage or absence of transportation because it caters to other schools is the limitation of this model, and it is a problem that needs immediate attention. In Fig. 3, the central school is indicated as (1). School 2.1 is located in a remote place and has a lack of good transportation facilities. In this case, School 2 will serve as a point of contact for School 2.1 in Figure 4.

FIGURE 4

Model for Branching Out the Schools
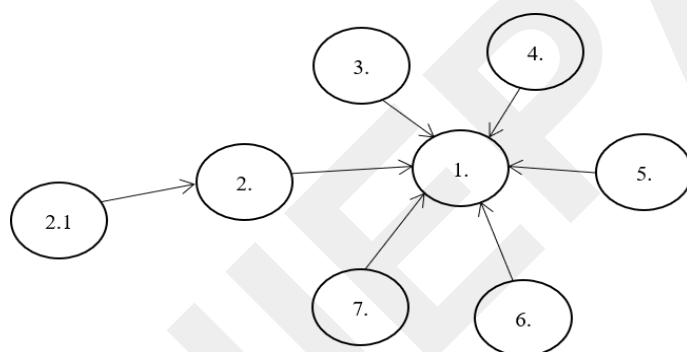
Creating a Web of Resources

With 1233 independent secondary schools, the distribution of these schools, particularly in geographically challenging situations, is uneven in Maharashtra. In the current arrangement, these independent schools may not be well-equipped to provide the best to the attached schools, even when the latter are at a distance of 5-10 km. Therefore, in such situations, creating a web of schools to facilitate each other with necessary resources seems to be a workable proposition.

FIGURE 5

Model for Creating a Web of Resources for School
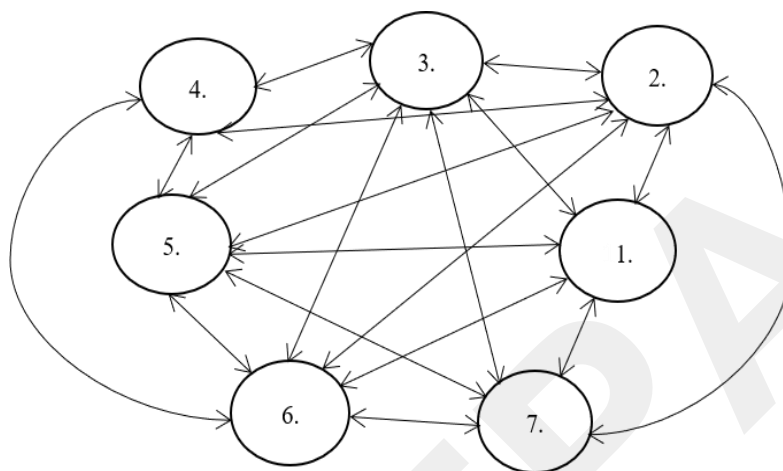
As one can see in this model, 1 represents a central school which is a primary school (or a secondary school with very limited resources). Here, resources from each school can be shared, and though for administrative ease, there is a central school, and resource sharing can be done by all (or most of) the other schools.

School Complexes for Diverse Contexts: Suggestive Models

At the preparatory phase, baseline assessments would help in understanding the situation for evolving situation-specific workable models of school complexes.

Base Line Assessment

This exercise would provide a foundation to the entire planning process for establishing a school complex and support to the preparation of the framework in which school complexes should ideally made to function. For initiating the process to identify schools on geographical conditions, prepare a list of 8-10 schools with minimum distance of 5-10 kilometres between the schools. There is a need to focus on schools with low enrolment taking into consideration the socio-economic demographic profile of the catchment area of the schools and low number of teachers (subject teacher) followed by creating the database of student profile, assessing the requirement of transport facilities followed by preparation of a flexible timetable and make adjustments with school timings that is suitable for children from all sections of society to attend school regularly. It is critical that the lead school is equipped with the physical infrastructure, ICT facilities with adequate number of subject specific teachers and teaching learning materials.

The following section is devoted primarily to the workable models in diverse contexts namely geographical locations, such as rural and urban areas, border areas, flood prone areas, forest areas, char areas, and double shift schools.

Border Areas

India has an international border of 4096 km of border with Bangladesh, 3323 km with Pakistan, 3488 km with China, 1751 km with Nepal, 699 km with Bhutan, and 1643 km with Myanmar. The challenges in border areas include hostility of neighbouring country; dealing with difficult terrains followed by poor road connectivity; political insecurities; and illegal migration across borders which alters the demographic ratio. In such areas the access and enrolment of children is a big issue mostly due to inaccessibility of the area leading to high dropout and lack of basic infrastructure facilities, transport facilities due to difficult terrains. Also, the children may be scattered and schools suffer from shortage of teachers, poor awareness among parents and lack of support from School Management Committees (SMCs). The schools working days may suffer due to curfews, insurgency, cross border issues and unrest, questioning the safety and security of children attending schools. Teacher shortage is amplified by difficulties in teacher posting and reporting. Model for Border Areas may be the same as is discussed earlier in Figure 5 by creating a web of resources for school which represents a central school which is a primary school (or a secondary school with very limited resources). Here, resources from each school can be shared, and for administrative ease, there is a central school, and resource sharing can be done by all (or most of) the other schools.

The model explores the use of ICT to connect learning to children and classrooms virtually. It is assumed that this would ease the challenge to access namely transport, safety and security of children and shortage of teachers. It is suggested that there can be a community of subject teachers who can connect virtually with children across levels which includes *Anganwadi*, primary, secondary and senior secondary level. A hybrid model classroom where the classrooms are virtual, have weeklong, time bound daily interaction (two hours a day) utilising online meet or indigenised state government apps for teaching learning purposes. Internet connectivity needs to be improved for this model to be successful, which could be done through involving private and public players.

It is proposed that the two major stakeholders, i.e. students and teachers, should meet physically for teaching learning only twice a month in the physical premises of school complex structure. Transport facility can be planned meticulously pooling all possible resources of state, CSR and NGOs. Transport for plying the children twice a month with safety and security to be arranged in coordination with the security forces like local police, Army, BSF, Coast Guards, ITBSF and para military. Age wise and subject wise, self-learning teaching learning modules designed by eminent educationists and academicians can be designed for children for a holistic, memorable and pragmatic teaching learning experience. The SCMC considering the peculiarity of the area should include a representative from BADP, academician, representative of the CSR discharging agency in the area, representative of NGOs working in the area. The school complex development plan should represent the needs of the individual schools with a goal to develop a model complex providing high quality education in border areas.
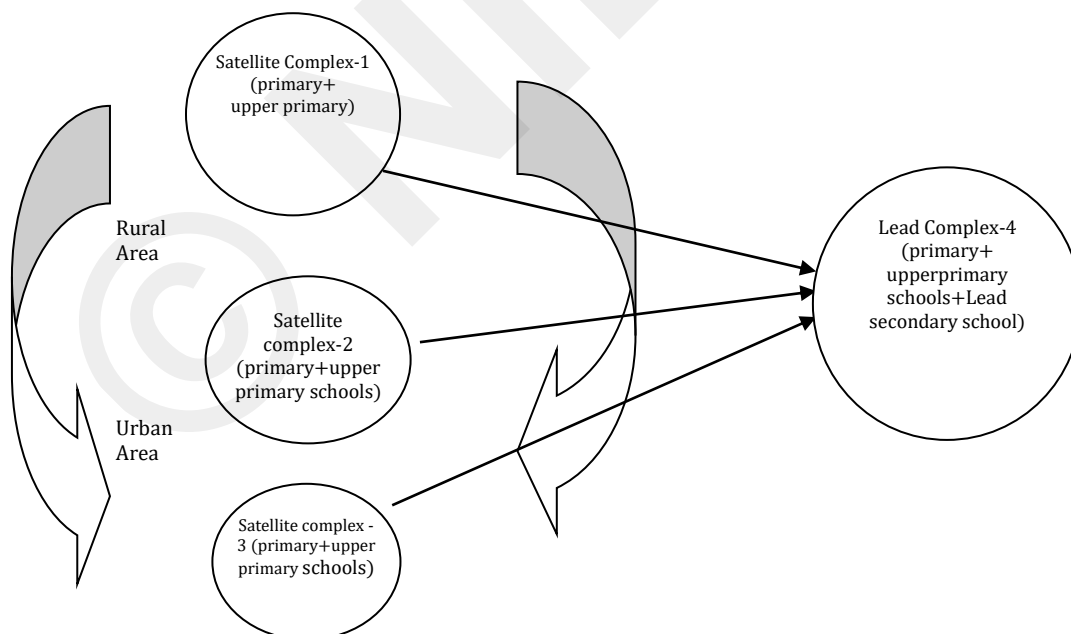
The Char Areas

The char (flood prone) areas in Assam are flood prone areas, are underdeveloped and account for one of the largest concentrations of illiterate population. These are backward

areas marked by poverty, lack of access to drinking water, lack of sanitary services, high mortality rate due to poor access to health infrastructure and lack of livelihood opportunities. The char areas lack sufficient educational institutions. The villages have primary schools but the children have to travel to the nearby district for studying in higher grades. Though certain char areas have secondary schools, they are marked by lack of infrastructure and vacant posts for teaching staff leading to high drop-out rates. With poor infrastructure, lack of subject teachers and an unprecedented PTR, the quality of education is dismal. School complexes in char area schools would need to ensure that every school has sufficient teachers and resources and also children can avail internet facilities.

Char areas have minimal secondary schools and therefore, one cannot persist with the NEP 2020 mandate that the lead school has to be a secondary school. It is suggested that each school complex in char areas can be a mix of preparatory and middle school. Schools in char areas have minimal infrastructure, ICT and teacher resources, therefore rather than collaborating within rural char areas as a complex, the complex can extend to urban areas for maximum resource utilisation. Schools in rural char areas can derive support from a lead school or a school complex that is situated in the nearest urban area. The entire complex structure can be supported by the nearest District Institute of Education and Training (DIET) or teacher training institutes for teacher training and capacity building. Local teacher training institutes can also provide teaching assistants/interns to neighbouring small schools/single teacher schools for supporting teaching learning activities.

FIGURE 6

Model for Flood Prone Areas

Digital education is a difficult proposition in such areas. The lead school that is not in a char area, but situated in an urban area can be equipped with internet facilities. The school complex can tie up with local authorities such as Police Department, Health Department, nearby Army units etc, so as to ensure safety and security of children during floods. During floods, the school complexes can undertake online classes and Nodal teachers can be instituted so as to monitor and review children's learning. CRCC needs to be selected from within the schools forming the complex as currently CRCC apply for the position from any school of the district and this set up may cause issues of regularity and attendance. *Anganwadis* are under the Women and Child Welfare Department and priorities are less academic and more into areas around food and nutrition, adolescent girl child, vaccinations etc. There will be changes required to brought in this direction if *Anganwadis* have to be merged within a school complex.

The Forest Areas

School complexes in forest areas face the challenges of terrain, road connectivity, natural calamities, etc. The suggested number of schools for this working model would be five in number where one Secondary school in a semi urban area would act as a lead school and the rest would be feeder schools, composed of two preparatory schools and two middle schools located in villages/forests within ten kms from the lead school.

FIGURE 7

Model for Forest Areas
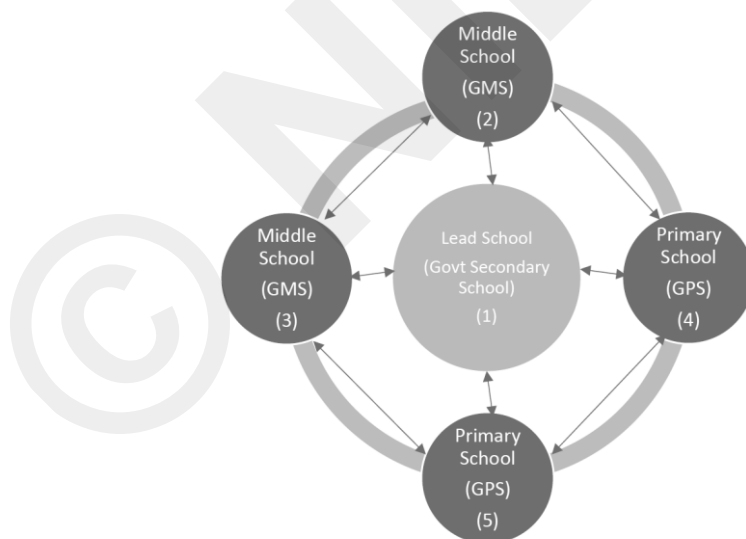
The lead school would be a secondary school located in a semi-urban location and would house most of the vital facilities which includes Computer Labs, Science Labs, etc. Middle Schools would facilitate as a community based indigenous vocational training centre by sourcing experts in handicrafts from the village/forest community and also act as centres of

Arts and Music by sourcing music teachers from their locality be it music teachers serving in churches, religious institutions or local musicians. These two centres could share human and material resources with nearest Primary school as well as the lead school. Regarding transportation, the complex should have a fleet of at least three mini buses built for off-road conditions to ensure students/teachers reach the allocated destination to serve the system. Arrangements would be made for sourcing and outsourcing of teachers, subject's experts or resources from each school for which the stakeholders should develop a work plan before the commencement of each academic year. The school complex head needs to decide on broad areas of development in consultation with each school head in the cluster. Given the challenges faced in forest located schools of bad road connectivity, terrains and rain, each feeder schools should arrange accommodation facilities/hostels for teachers visiting outside their posted schools. If such arrangements are made then routine visits for two weeks in a month can be made on rotational basis thereby making use of teacher resources of each school and making up for staff shortages. The heads of the feeder schools and the assistant head teacher of the secondary school should form the core team to develop the annual work plan as well as the rotational routine preparations. As a recommendation, residential schools that provide quality education can be established and made to be part of the school complexes in forest areas.

The Rural Plains The rural areas are in majority across the nation and it is suggested to combine schools of excellence leading the cluster for school complex as a model as an example from the state of Uttarakhand. The number of schools within the cluster may consist of Senior Secondary School: 2 (Both Government); Higher Secondary School: 2 (01 Government and 01 private), Upper Primary School: 1 (Government), Primary School: 5 (04 Government and 01 Private) and *Anganwadi*: 5 (04 co-located with Primary Schools and 01 standalone).

FIGURE 8

Model of School Complex in Rural Plains Utilising the Services of Schools of Excellence
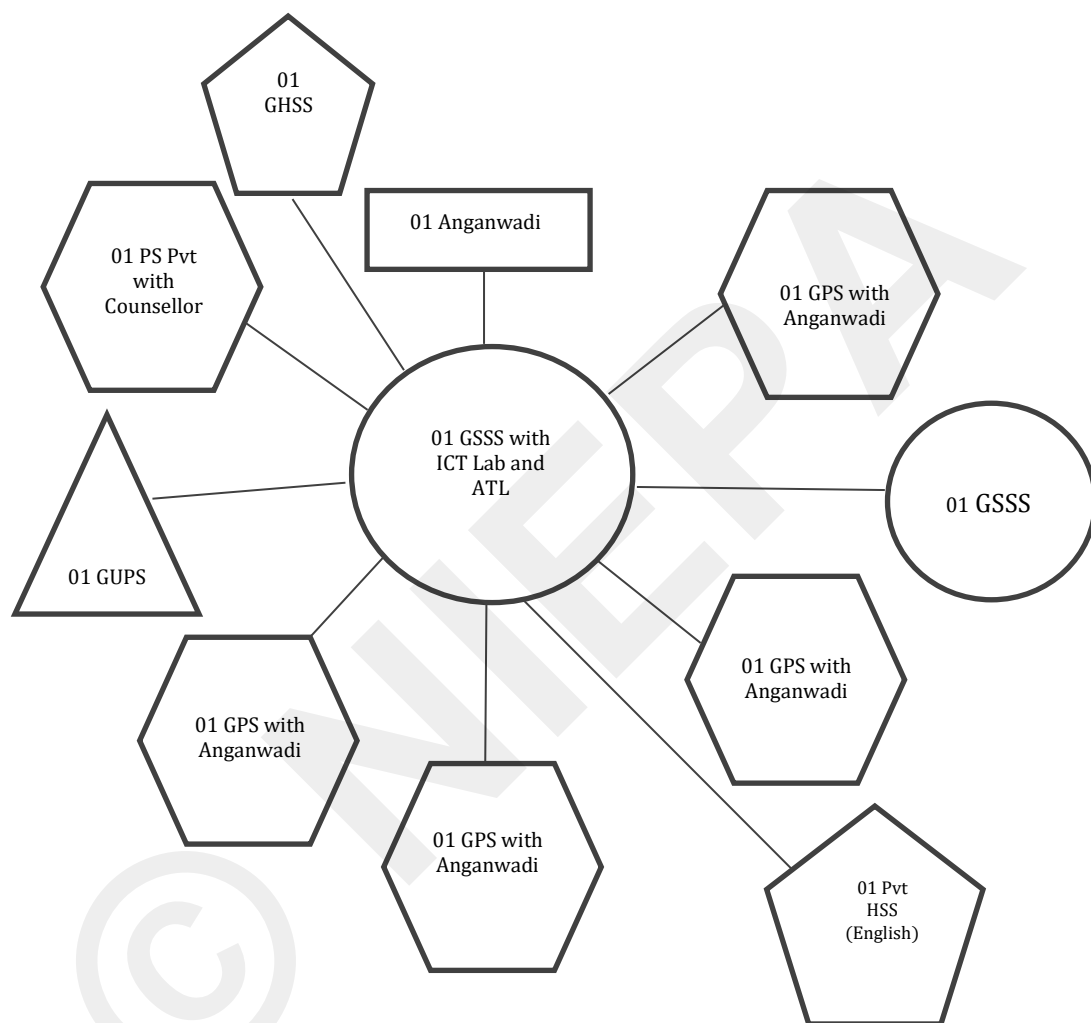
There are three schools of excellence, one GSSS with an ICT lab and Atal Tinkering Lab (ATL) the only one in the area, one GHS with state awardee teacher of English and one private Primary School with a Counsellor. The sharing of resources is proposed as the GSSS will host two schools in rotation for sharing of the ICT and ATL. The vehicle for the transporting the students will be provided by both private schools, the GHS will depute the English teacher to visit two schools in a week and help students with their reading and comprehension abilities. Authorised TA/DA to the teacher will be paid by the GHS. The private Primary School will also depute the Counsellor to visit two schools per week to

interact with students identified by the school with a provision to pay TA/DA by the private school.

Schools in Disadvantaged Areas with Double Shift Schools within a Complex

Schools opt for double shifts due to various reasons. The most common among them include that there are a lesser number of schools in an area with high enrolment and less scope for building new schools. Double shift schools are a boon for marginalised population whose children cannot attend regular school time. The double shift schools are an advantage for girl children as it solves issues related to security, anti-social activities at the locality, household chores, babysitting younger siblings etc. Double shift schools are an added advantage for children with special needs (CWSN) who require assistance from parents to reach school. These schools are equally advantageous for children of transgender and children of sex workers to attend school from red zone areas without any inhibition. Double shift schools are also advantageous for accommodating children from displaced populations. Issues such as teacher shortage and lack of resources can also be mitigated in double shift schools

Secondary school with proper infrastructure, adequate staff and well accessible to all the primary, upper primary and other high schools in the complex will be identified as the lead school. There will be further strengthening of the capacity of the school by providing necessary resources; human and physical resources to cater to the needs of the schools in the complex. The lead school will have two shifts (morning and evening) to cater to the needs of children who require different school timings according to their needs and conditions. During admission process, the admission form will provide an option for the child and the parents to opt for morning/evening shift school timing to avoid any form of discrimination among children for their social, economic, or health conditions, thereby, strive for inclusive education in the school.

FIGURE 9

Schools in Disadvantaged Areas with Double Shift Schools
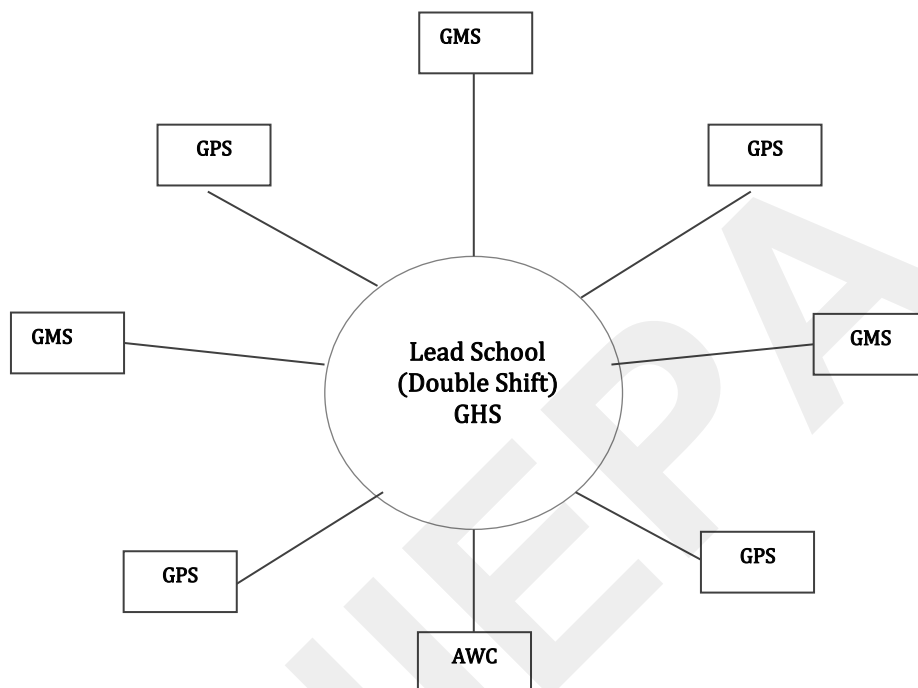
Governance and management of double shift schools determines the effectiveness of these schools. The SCMC along with the school complex head will have to sort of instructional time, co-curricular activities, financial requirements etc. for running schools in double shift. Academic inputs such as teacher training, monitoring and supervision needs to be given priority in double shift schools. There is a need to decide whether school heads in double shift schools will be separately appointed or one will take responsibility for both the shifts. SCMC along with the nearby DIET or teacher training institutes need to support teachers with innovative pedagogies/ ICT skills to reduce teacher fatigue during double shifts. Double shift schools can also function as an adult learning centre and informal classes for students.

Conclusion

School complexes are established with a vision to bring quality to the school system. The success in translating vision into real practice largely depends on understanding the contextual realities of the locales in which a complex is to be established. There is a need for strategic planning and base line assessment with respect to the demography, teacher availability, student learning levels, infrastructure availability and stakeholder support and community participation before establishing a complex. There is a need to implement a three-pronged approach to school complex implementation with focus on the following:

a. School complexes to focus on academic improvement rather than merely being an administrative unit and school complex needs to provide a collaborative learning environment with focus on inclusion, equity and quality. School complexes needs renewed attention to teaching learning process and teacher professional development with inbuilt monitoring and feedback mechanisms. School complexes needs to ensure a strong learning culture in schools that constitute the complexes through strategic resource sharing, learner centered approach to teaching learning process and forming communities of learning.

b. Improving leadership within the complex: The nature of leadership within complexes determines the effectiveness of student learning and teaching learning process. School complex heads and school principals need to collaborate and plan the school development and school complex development plans based on the socio-cultural, economic, and organisational priorities of the complex. School clusters' heads need to establish a culture of innovation to bring about changes and transformation within the school complexes. Leadership in school complexes also needs to be empowered in the areas of distributive leadership, interpersonal communication skills, team building and building ever-lasting partnerships with community.

c. Improving the administrative and financial parameters: Specific guidelines with respect to collaboration of schools under various managements within the school clusters need to be articulated. Autonomy of schools within the school cluster needs to be specified. School complex development plans and school development plans needs to be developed with clear vision on the change and transformation that is perceived by each of the school complexes. The SCDP also should entail a financial plan for resource generation and mobilisation. Resources may include physical spaces, infrastructure, sports and other co-curricular activities, and salary, recruitment and professional development of teachers.

There is a need for documentation of best practices and further research on school complex implementation in order to study its effectiveness in a diverse country such as India and to identify further areas of improvement. Overall, while the concept of school complexes seems justified, there is a need to create system level leadership at different levels within the system, work around the localised constraints to implementation while at the same time respond to the changing professional development needs of the stakeholders within the complexes.

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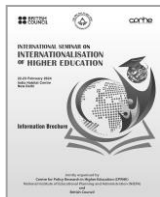
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Why do 'They' Return? An Analysis of Marginalised Students in Urban Spaces

Bashir Ahmad[*]

Abstract

Urban spaces are experienced as hubs of opportunities, attracting young people and students. Primarily, the availability of quality institutionalised education draws millions of students from rural and remote areas to urban spaces. Building on this understanding, this paper addresses the challenges faced by marginalised students in urban settings and identifies the factors responsible for their decision to return to their hometowns. This study comprehends return migration within the larger framework of migration theory, which is complex and multidimensional, lacking a coherent framework. This study takes into account a number of viewpoints, including social network theory, neoclassical economics, the new economics of labour migration, and Cerase's broader framework to understand the goals and motives of marginalised students who are moving back to their places of origin. The sequential exploratory method has been used to capture both quantitative and qualitative data from the sample (N=78). The findings indicate that marginalised students are facing discrimination due to their identity and language, leading them to prefer living within a close-knit cultural circle with limited interactions and connections. Consequently, the experiences of these students in urban spaces have been disheartening. They often grapple with feelings of alienation, adjustment issues, language barriers, and the challenge of assimilation in their new environment. These students are unfamiliar with the daily challenges of urban life, which is a major reason identified in the study for why they prefer to return home rather than stay and establish themselves in urban areas. Moreover, their strong cultural ties to their homelands and the nature of employment opportunities are all highlighted as key factors influencing their choice to return home.

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Introduction

The general misconception identified among the studies considering migration is that it is a unidirectional process (Dhar & Bhagat, 2020). However, Ravenstein (1885) introduced the *'Laws of Migration'* which recognise *'Return Migration'* as an important component within the migration process. The lack of reliable data is a major reason for the area remaining understudied (El-Mallakh & Wahba, 2016). Scholars thus began to prioritise this area in the early 1960s (Cassarino, 2004), and the migration process started being studied from the perspective of return migration (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012).

Literary works guide us toward understanding the impact of return migration on the lives of individuals and their societies, particularly for those who return with human capital (knowledge and skills). Contrary to the concept of '*Brain Drain*,' receiving societies gain an advantage through *'Brain Gain'* (Wahba, 2021). It has the potential to become a source of economic and social growth through the diffusion of knowledge and increased productivity in the origin state (Choudhury, 2016).

Furthermore, significant attention has been directed towards the concept of return migration, primarily from the perspective of labour migration (De Haas *et al*, 2015; Dustmann, 1996). However, it is evident that the perspective of students has not received the attention it deserves. According to Wahba (2021), the rate of return migration is notably high among highly skilled and educated individuals, including students.

This study is conducted in India, a country with a staggering 450 million internal migrants (De, 2019), among which 42 million are students (Census, 2011). The trend of intra-state student migrations is on the rise, primarily due to regional disparities in the distribution of higher educational institutions (Varghese & Panigrahi, 2019; Tilak, 2015).

In the context of Ladakh, the study by Ahmad (2020: 45) brings to attention the fact that the region can boast of only six colleges, all of which offer bachelors degrees. Unfortunately, there is not a single professional institution available for aspiring students. For Ladakhi students, the nearest university is located in Kashmir which is 230 kilometres away (from the Kargil district), while it is a daunting 480 kilometres away (from the Leh district).

The Area of Study

Surrounded by the towering peaks of the mighty Himalayan Mountains, Ladakh, a newly formed union territory in Northern India, is one of the most challenging terrains in the world. The estimated population of this region is three lakhs, covering an expanse of 59,146 square kilometres. A majority of its inhabitants reside in remote hamlets, inhospitable terrain, and desolate mountain valleys. Ladakh, comprising 242 villages, is often referred to as a 'Constellation of Villages' (Pirie, 2006). Within Ladakh, there are two districts, namely Kargil and Leh, with 95 per cent of the population belonging to various tribes, including Balti Beda, Bot (or Boto), Brokpa (or Drokpa, Dard, Shin), Changpa, Garra, Mon, and Purigpa.

Historically, due to a challenging and inaccessible transportation system, Ladakh remained a remote area where people heavily relied on agriculture and domestic animals for subsistence. The prevailing economic system at that time was based on barter, with minimal use of cash. In the 1970s, the deployment of the army as a result of the Sino-Indian and India-Pakistan wars led to significant changes in the lives of tribal people, particularly in areas concentrated with military presence. Consequently, Ladakh was opened to tourism in

1974, bringing about a transformation in trading practices, shifting from a barter system and agriculture to the adoption of sophisticated imported goods and a cash-based economy. This transition marked the onset of a complex and modern lifestyle, causing cultural changes among the tribal population (Michaud, 1996; Hodge, 1991).

Migration Trajectories of Ladakhi Students

Both the state and central governments have remained anxious about the subject of education in Ladakh. The region is strategically located along two international borders: the Line of Control (LoC) and the Line of Actual Control (LAC). According to Goswani (1999), the governments did not prioritise the education sector in the region, leading to issues such as limited access to schools in remote areas, the presence of unqualified teachers, teacher absenteeism, and unfavourable student-teacher ratios.

Richard (2015) pointed out how the governments and non-governmental organisations collaborated during the 1980s to make schools accessible to every student, despite the challenging physical environment and the effects of conflict. While Ladakhi parents were initially hesitant to enrol their children in formal education, Hodge (1991) informs us that they now support education more broadly and strive to provide their children with the best possible education.

The literacy rate in Ladakh has gradually improved, reaching 74.24 per cent according to the 2011 Census, compared to 63.10 per cent in 2001. Furthermore, the results of board exams show tremendous improvement as a result of these efforts. Schools have been established in every village. However, policymakers continue to face significant challenges related to the quality of education in the region (Ryde, 2016).

The increasing demand for higher education in Ladakh has exerted significant pressure on the governments to establish new educational institutions to cater to the aspirations of the local populace. The primary challenge lies in maintaining equilibrium between the demand and supply of higher education opportunities. Historically, Ladakh had only two higher educational institutions: the Government Degree College of Leh, established in 1994, followed by the establishment of Government Degree College of Kargil in 1995 (Ahmad, 2020).

However, these institutions initially offered only Bachelor of Arts programmes until 2005, rendering them incapable of fully meeting the demand for higher education in this remote region. Subsequently, two additional undergraduate degree programs, namely Bachelor of Science and Bachelor of Commerce, were introduced. Furthermore, these colleges became affiliated with the University of Kashmir. Unfortunately, the Kashmir valley has been marked by frequent unrest, posing a significant impediment for students seeking to complete their courses within the stipulated time frame. Consequently, the trend in enrolment rates has demonstrated a decline with each passing academic year, largely due to delays in the examination and evaluation processes.

In light of these challenging circumstances, students from Ladakh have been compelled to explore alternative options, often choosing to leave their hometowns in pursuit of higher education opportunities in other Indian cities or even abroad (Sharma, 2018).

Theorising the Student Return Migration

Return migration has to be understood above the idea of migrants going back to their places of origin after spending a few years in the host state or country. It has a multifaceted nature, including 'return movement,' 'return flow,' 'back migration,' 'counter flow' and 'second-time migration' (Bovenkerk, 2012). While the concept emerged far back in the nineteenth century (Ravenstein, 1885), this area remains unexplored. Also, many factors have been further identified. The major factor is due to lack of availability of suitable data on migration. It is challenging for countries even today to maintain data on return migration (King, 1978).

The existing literature and empirical evidence inform that the focus of studies on return migration is inclined partially toward labour migration (Arowolo, 2000; De Haas *et al*, 2015). The conducted studies were dedicated to the economic perspective of income, remittance, job opportunities, etc. However, the perspective of students' return migration has yet to catch the attention of scholars. Therefore, students' return migration remains an understudied and unexplored area.

This study aims to penetrate the large horizon of the area of migration. This will provide empirical evidence by probing why the students are returning to their places of origin after completing their studies in urban spaces.

As return migration could not be a sense in the absence of migration, and logically it's a subset area within the migration. Migration as a field is lacking in formulating an acceptable theory due to multifaceted directions and the association of overlapping concepts with it (De Haas, 2021; Richmond, 1983). Most of the studies in the area of return migration have generally been concerned with similar issues, paralleling the above concerns.

Theoretical Derivation of Return Migration

The phenomenon of return migration has been a subject of investigation for scholars, who have primarily examined it through the lenses of two major theories: Neoclassical Economics theory and the New Economics of Labour Migration (Cassarino, 2004; Constant & Massey, 2002). Notably, these studies have predominantly shaped the economic perspective on return migration.

However, Cerase (1974) introduced a broader perspective on returnees, transcending the traditional economic orthodoxy. Cerase's framework explored returnees from four distinct angles: the return of failure, return of conservatism, return of retirement, and return of innovation. This approach underscored the importance of understanding returnees' aspirations, expectations, and needs. It is worth noting that this study does not delve into the third principle, 'return of retirement,' as it falls outside the scope of our research. Instead, we rely on the other three established principles to discern the motivations and aspirations for returning home among marginalised students studying in urban areas.

Moreover, the 'social network theory' offers another valuable perspective through which to analyse the present study. Cassarino (2004) offered a comprehensive conceptualisation of return migration from a societal perspective. This theory views returnees as individuals who maintain strong connections with their places of origin. It underscores the significance of inter-regional social ties and interactions that individuals maintain.

Social network theory highlights the enduring relationships that migrants maintain with their places of origin, diverging from traditional migration models that primarily focus on the shift from one region to another. Moreover, this theory does not encompass individuals who have completed a circular migration pattern; instead, it distinguishes them by their ongoing ties to their original communities in both social and economic spheres. These individuals often act as bridges between their host and home regions, facilitating the flow of information, resources, and cultural exchange. In the backdrop of theory and method, this research addresses three questions:
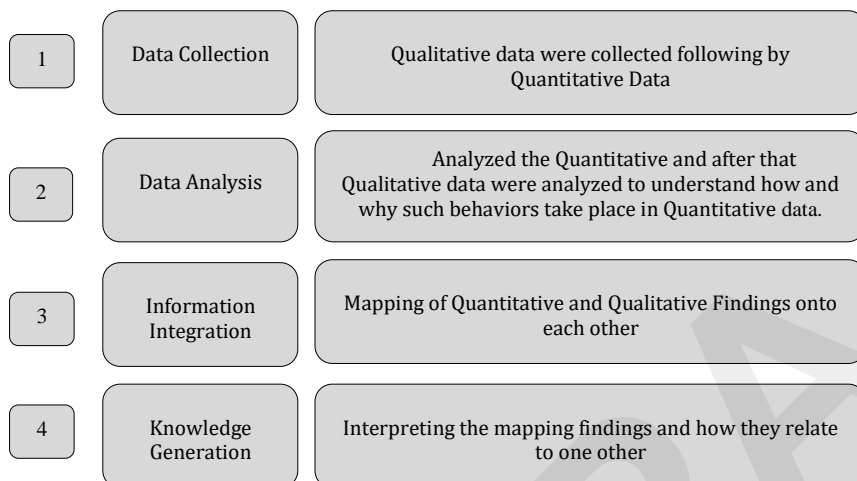
1. How do marginalised students experience urban spaces?
2. What are the factors that motivate or compel students to return to their place of origin before or upon completing their degree?
3. What are the intended societal changes that returnees aim to initiate upon returning to their place of origin?

Methodology

In the present study, the researcher used a 'mixed methods' approach. This choice was made because the researcher's primary focus was on determining the percentage of students, which required numerical data. Additionally, the study aimed to gain insight into students' experiences in urban spaces and their perception of decision-making, for which qualitative data were necessary. To effectively combine and analyse both types of data in a systematic manner, the researcher adopted a 'Sequential Explanatory Design' (Creswell, 2014: 194-195). This design involves the collection and analysis of quantitative data, followed by qualitative data, in two consecutive phases within a single study. The integration of both quantitative and qualitative methods enhances the robustness of the analysis (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998).

Data collection for this study was carried out in two phases. In the first phase, a closed-ended questionnaire was distributed to the target group via Google Forms, resulting in 78 respondents. These responses were analysed thoroughly. For the second phase, the researcher prepared a semi-structured interview and administered it to a sample of 10 participants using a convenient sampling method. These samples included 3 participants from Delhi, 2 from Srinagar (J&K), 2 from Jammu, and 1 each from Chandigarh, Dehradun, and Haryana. The responses from these interviews were recorded and transcribed. This process helped identify key themes and provided the researcher with a framework to explain and expand upon the numerical findings obtained in the first phase. After a careful examination and analysis of the data, the following themes were constructed and discussed thoroughly in the subsequent section.

The following figure shows the graphical representation of how the researcher used the 'Sequential Exploratory Design' of Mix Method to collect and analyse the data.

1	Data Collection	Qualitative data were collected following by Quantitative Data
2	Data Analysis	Analyzed the Quantitative and after that Qualitative data were analyzed to understand how and why such behaviors take place in Quantitative data.
3	Information Integration	Mapping of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings onto each other
4	Knowledge Generation	Interpreting the mapping findings and how they relate to one other

Source: Author

Results and Discussion

Identification of marginalised groups

The study focuses on the marginalised sections, and the data were collected from students of Ladakh. The data reveal that among the respondents, 98.72 per cent were from the Scheduled Tribe category, while only 1.28 per cent belonged to the general category. Moreover, the highest number of respondents came from the Balti tribe, comprising 41.02 per cent, followed by Purigpa at 16.66 per cent, and 14.10 per cent from Brokpa and Bot tribes each. The lowest participation rates were recorded among Mon at 6.41 per cent, Changpa at 3.84 per cent and Garra at 2.56 per cent.

These students are enrolled in various universities and colleges across India, with the highest percentage, 35.90 per cent, currently studying in the national capital, Delhi. Other clusters include 21.80 per cent in Jammu, 17.94 per cent in Chandigarh, 15.38 per cent in Srinagar, 2.56 per cent in Dehradun, while the remaining 11.53 per cent studying in other states such as Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Kerala, Haryana, and Maharashtra, among others

It has been found that these students face various challenges during their course of study, as mainlanders hold speculative perceptions about tribes and the reservation system. There is a prevailing belief that students admitted through reservations are less intelligent and gain access to the system solely due to the quota system. One of the students shared his experience:

"In the classroom, my teachers and classmates presume that I gained admission through the reservation seat, and they consistently judge me as being less proficient in my studies" [Delhi 2021].

The academic achievements of these students are often marginalized in academic spaces, and judgments are based on identity rather than intelligence. According to Kasbe

(2020), marginalised students encounter bias and discrimination from both administrators and their peers, who primarily come from upper castes, in university settings.

Furthermore, as one of the respondents described, mainlanders sometimes mistake them for foreigners due to their facial and physical features, which are similar to those of the Chinese and have been erroneously labelled as "Mongolian Fringe" by Gergan & Smith (2022). As described by one of the respondents:

> *"Four friends and I visited Purana Qila (a historical place in Delhi) last year, and the gatekeeper insisted us to purchase tickets from the foreigner counter. We were surprised by this request. He later verified our identity and allowed us to enter. This was a disconcerting and strange moment for us*" [Delhi 2021]."

The narration reflects the everyday struggle to assimilate into the host societies. For many, leaving home to pursue education is only half the struggle; the other half involves selecting a suitable college and adjusting to a new culture. Furthermore, the harsh prejudices and stereotypes they came across within the nation raise serious concerns about the diversity and sovereignty of India as a democratic state.

Perspective of First-Generation Learners

Scholars have indicated that students from marginalised communities are more likely to come from underrepresented, low-income families, belong to specific ethnic groups, and experience racial minoritisation (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020). The study by Wadhwa (2018) strongly advocates the need to address the issue of first-generation learners (FGLs). Furthermore, the empirical findings of Ramos-Sánchez & Nichols (2007) indicate that FGL students often face greater challenges in pursuing higher education after high school. Additionally, the lack of family mentorship is identified as another potential obstacle for FGLs in achieving their academic and personal educational goals. The study of Pike and Kuh (2005) also observed that

> *"...first-generation college students are less likely to persist and graduate, surprisingly little is known about their college experiences and the ways those experiences compare to the experiences of students who have college-educated parents" (p. 276).*

The percentage of FGLs in the present study was 61.53 per cent. This numerical figure indicates that the majority of students are first-generation learners pursuing higher education outside Ladakh. Richard (2015) observed the changing pattern of prioritising education in Ladakh in her ethnographic study. Her study informs us that education, which was previously restricted to elementary education in Ladakh, is now widely supported among Ladakhi parents as a priority for their children.

The present study aimed to bridge the gap by exploring the experiences of marginalised first-generation learners in urban areas, transcending the conventional reliance on statistics and numerical data. The challenges respondents encountered in the urban spaces within and outside classrooms are reflected in the following statement.

> *"...I have a terrible experience. I was selected for the master's programme at the University of Kashmir in 2015 but due to the non-availability of the internet and exposure, I missed the counselling session. After that, I don't know what I have to do, and one of my friends recommend for B.Ed. and I landed in a private college for*

the B.Ed. admission. I even didn't know what B.Ed. is all about. When I remember those days, I see how isolated and ignored we were." [Dehradun 2021]

The FGLs students struggle in academic spaces; they face various difficulties in the institutions. As (Ramos-Sánchez & Nichols, 2007)., FGL students find it more difficult to pursue higher education after high school. The FGLs hardly have family support and mentorship.

The classroom experiences of FGLs and their integration with fellow counterparts can be understood from the following statement,

'I always prefer to sit alone; I am doing my B.Sc. honours. The initial year was difficult for me; no one was there to help me to complete the projects and assignments... I have two friends from North East, I feel comfortable with them...' [Delhi 2021]

The narration highlights the experiences of FGLs in the classroom. They feel alienated due to their language and disclosure. For this, scholars argue that educational campuses can be complex for students coming from minority groups in terms of inclusion and exclusion (Andersson, Sadgrove & Valentine, 2012). Another respondent expressed his experiences in these words,

"My experience in classroom was not so bad, but I always feel inferiority complex in classroom due to my language..." [Haryana 2021]

The qualitative analysis highlighted that the harsh experiences of FGLs in the classroom is tangible, they feel alienated due to their language and disclosure. Further, an interesting result that reflects from the qualitative data is that these students are feeling easy with their counterparts from North East regions than from mainlander. This tendency of association and link is defined as 'Contact Zone' (Askins and Pain, 2011), where different cultural groups meet and interact, and constitute their relation to each other. Further, the study of (Vasan 2017) arguing that despite the cultural and ethnic differences with North Eastern students their features appear similar to the majoritarian north-Indian mind. This confronts questions to the Ladakhi youths on their belongingness to the nation in many ways.

Perspective of Second-Generation Learners

In this section, the researcher conjointly analysed the data of the number of SGLs students and their sibling's employment status. The data inform that the siblings and parents of 38.46 per cent of respondents migrated for higher education before them. Among them, 23.07 per cent were brothers, 8.97 per cent were sisters, and 6.41 per cent were their parents.

The data also reveal that the experiences of FGLs and SGLs differ somewhat in terms of the admissions process and supervision. However, their experiences of adjustment and integration within host societies appear to be more similar. As a student narrated,

"I am pursuing my BTech, I have selected this program through PMSSS... My elder brother is already in government service, he guided me to study and get through the course... from counselling session to allotment of college, he was an admirer..." [Chandigarh 2021]

A similar response was made by another student:

"…Without help of my brother, I didn't think that I will select for this course and study in such a pioneer institution…" [Delhi 2021]

These statements imply that students whose siblings and parents were part of the system earlier face fewer obstacles compared to students who are new to the system. However, when it comes to institutional experiences, they share similar concerns with FGLs.

"…adjustment with classmates is difficult… the sense of alienation is always there. Siblings can help with the admission process, but they are not with us in the classroom for help." [Haryana 2021]

A related statement by another student was as below:

"…Identifying the appropriate reading materials and skim them is daunting task… the mainlanders students are well versed on such issues in advance, we lacking behind…" [Chandigarh 2021]

The analysis of quantitative data also included the employment status of siblings and parents who have already returned after completing their degrees. Among the returnees, the highest 50 per cent are underemployed, while only 20 per cent are employed, and 16.66 per cent are unemployed. To comprehend why the largest number of returnees are underemployed, a respondent expressed their perspective on how it affects students' perception of 'home' with the following words:

"My sister has done her Master's and BEd. from Jammu, on completion of her study she returns home in search of a job. But unfortunately, she didn't get through any permanent job and now she is working as *a contractual teacher in a school in Ladakh. I feel bad for her… but I also concern for myself, how I can survive if I failed to secure a job…"* [Srinagar 2021].

Another respondent said:

"…my brother is struggling for a job; he has been appeared for many interviews but, has not able to get through… Job is a serious concern…" [Jammu 2021].

After returning home, the siblings' experiences revealed a significant concern in the decision-making process. The responses reflect two serious concerns of those students whose siblings have already returned home and are struggling to find jobs. The first concern that respondents were worry about the availability of jobs in Ladakh, and the second concern is the uncertainties in Ladakh after becoming a Union territory. The job concern in Ladakh has been highlighted in many news headlines, such as 'Unemployment among Youth: A Crisis in the Making' (*Reach Ladakh Bulletin*). 'Years Since JK's Bifurcation, Ladakh Youth Cry for Job Opportunities as Region Witnesses a Surge in Unemployment' (*Free Press Kashmir*), 'Bifurcation of J&K: No Jobs, No Safeguards in the Past Year for Ladakh' (*News Click*), 'Acute Unemployment Problem in Ladakh: 8 Posts, 3800 Candidates' (*Early Times*), and 'Suffering of Gen-Y' (*Voice of Ladakh*). The argument of all these articles that appeared in various national and regional newspapers reflects the job scarcity in the region and raises concerns about the rising issue of unemployment. These articles support the concerns of the respondents regarding why they are so concerned about finding jobs in Ladakh and why there are so many returnees who are unemployed. This pitches in an important question, why so many returnees are under and unemployed?

Return Decision-Making Process

Based on quantitative responses, the investigator categorised the raw data into three symmetrical groups (0-5 years, 6-10 years, and above 10 years) so as to observe the trend of outbound migration within each time frame. The quantitative analysis reveals that 16.66 per cent of students have already spent more than ten years away, 35.89 per cent have been away for more than six years, and 47.43 per cent have been away for the last one to five years. A linear trend indicates a significant increase in migration as each time period passes. To delve deeper into the growing trend of outbound migration, the investigator turned to the qualitative data.

The scenario of inter-regional student migration is not unique, as a report published in the Times of India (Hemali, 2014) states that 37 lakh students migrated for education within India over a decade. Ladakh's situation is no exception; the limited connectivity with the rest of the country has greatly affected the education sector. While there is a lack of reliable and authentic data specific to Ladakh, empirical evidence from the study (Ahmad, 2020) shows that 79.50 per cent of students enrolled in different colleges in Ladakh prefer to move outside the region for higher education due to inadequate educational facilities.

One respondent from each of the three age groups mentioned above was interviewed regarding how time affects their attitude toward returning to their native places and the meaning of *'Home'*. In this context, one respondent who has been residing outside their home for ten years stated that,

> *"I wish to go back home, after finishing my study, however, it's difficult for me to analyse how much my home has changed... what will be the attitude of people towards me if I return without a suitable job..."* [Srinagar 2021]

The statement reflects the uncertainty of the respondent. They are unsure whether their society will accept them upon their return. The issue of reintegrating migrants into their home communities is often a topic of discussion. Scholars have paid little to no attention to internally displaced people who wish to return to their place of origin once their goals or circumstances have improved or been fulfilled (Arowolo, 2000).

Returnees who have spent less than ten years but more than five have a different perspective on returning; they are intrigued and eager to apply what they have learned during their time away.

> *"...Reform the educational Institutions' work regarding the evaluation of higher education & research. Create & Support opportunities initiating firms/start-ups/sectors,"* whereas another respondent said: *"I would surely work for the upgradation of the education system in Ladakh, for which students have to migrate... introducing different courses in different colleges which is in lack and yes working for job opportunities."* [Delhi; Jammu 2021]

These statements reflect their realisation about what their region lacks and what they can reform within their capacity. In both states, a similar trend can be observed: a strong desire to reform the education system. Cerase (1974) referred to this idea as the 'return of innovation,' signifying that returnees come back with innovative ideas. Their motivation is to serve as agents of social change. Furthermore, these returnees firmly believe that their ideas will lead to the implementation of desirable and productive changes in society.

Factors that Motivate to Return Home

Among the respondents, the highest number, at 83.33 per cent expressed a desire to return home, while 12.82 per cent expressed a preference for seeking work outside their hometown. However, 3.84 per cent were uncertain about their future decisions.

Furthermore, the reasons for migration were recorded numerically, with the highest percentage (26.92 per cent) returning for job opportunities, followed closely by 25.64 per cent returning due to their close social ties with their place of origin. Additionally, 17.94 per cent of students had personal motives for returning, and 10.25 per cent believed that surviving in urban cities was challenging for them.

The qualitative analysis provides an insight into the intentions behind these numerical figures. For Ladakhi students, leaving their home for crowded and polluted urban areas that they had only heard about through media was a significant adjustment. In their perception, cities meant skyscraper buildings, luxurious places for outings, a more civilized environment, and access to high-quality education opportunities. These students come from tribal regions and remote villages where quality higher education was seen as a 'privilege.' However, things have been changing, and parents now prefer to send their children to higher education in urban areas due to economic shifts.

Yet, the experiences of these students in urban spaces have been disheartening. They often grapple with feelings of alienation, adjustment issues, language barriers, and the challenge of assimilation in their new environment. These students are unfamiliar with the daily challenges of urban life, and this is a major reason identified in the study for why they prefer to return home rather than stay and establish themselves in urban areas.
A male student from Delhi University explained:

> "My parents are unaware of what am I doing and what course am I studying... they are illiterate and unaware of serious issues like mental health. I am facing a lot of hardship to make my space in these complex societies, sometimes I seriously thought to quit the study and return home."

He continued in order to explain why he saying so:

> "...Research is a hectic task; particularly for those who have not well grip on language. Many time I cried for hours... I console to myself. I always recall myself you are the chosen one... During colloquium and presentation I prefer not to speak or raise question. No one was around me to motivate. Now I am at my final stage of my thesis. If I share these incidents with my parents, who's did not even know what academia is all about and how the system works here, they may laugh at me..."[Delhi 2021].

This highlights two valuable results addressing why people from marginalized sections, even after doing prestigious degrees like PhD prefer to return home. The first finding is that for these students' urban spaces are suffocating them because no one is there for them during hard times. At the same time, the mental health issue that these students encountered in cities is unbearable to them.

The bond with their tribes and close association with their ethnic identity further emerge as a potential factor that urges these students to return to their place of origin. In urban spaces, these students gathered together on many occasions to show their sense of collective identity. Every state where students go for education has their student

associations. The objective of these student unions is to share solidarity and the common burden of fellow students.

A student expressed his thoughts in these words:

> "We use to celebrate every ethnic festival within Jammu in addition every year we gather for one day to celebrate 'Annual Day' to show our unity and solidarity, We all work together in chain, so no student feel alienate in the urban cities … ultimately we have to return home, we are here for five to ten years…" [Jammu 2021]

Another student said:

> "In comparison to other cities, fewer students are there… we have our own student union, we helps student's during admission process and after that to accommodate them…" [Dehradun 2021]

The sense of collective identity is the discerning feature of marginalized people (Kay, 2000). These groups shared an interactive sense of 'we-ness' and 'collective agency' (Snow, 2001). More than to show cohesion among group members, these students are also working to preserve their identities in the urban spaces where the risk of social exclusion, inequity, the precariousness of identity, and homesickness cannot be overlooked. Zahra (2023) informs about similar findings about the crucial role of student unions in easing the transition of Ladakhi students to urban centres for higher education and make the cities less harsh to the students and provide them with a sense of belongingness.

However, the majority of these students are intending to look for a job in their hometown. Despite the scarcity of jobs in the home state, their wanting to return can be understood from the response,

> "Both inside and outside the classroom, people treat us like second-class citizens. Going home is preferable to settling in such an exclusive society." [Chandigarh 2021]

The discrimination of marginalised sections for recruitment in higher educational institutions has been studied by (Sudipta, 2021; Bhattacharya, 2021). The central argument of both these articles concerns the caste-based discrimination in the elite institutions in India. The faculty strength of the ST category in these elite institutions is ranging from 0.34 per cent in IITs with zero representation in IIMs and central universities like Delhi University. Respondents' statements also indicated how difficult it is for them to survive in urban spaces. They feel there is no place for them as people treat them as incompetent. This leaves no choice but to return home and find a decent career or join any odd job. Findings also suggest that students from marginalized groups struggle to adjust to complex communities and choose to return because of their alienation and adjustment complexities in host societies, as the phenomenon known as *'Return of Failure.'*

Return and Social Change

The major themes that emerged from the data were 'education' and 'reform in education.' Upon their return, these individuals are eager to implement the knowledge and skills they have acquired during their migratory period. This phenomenon is referred to as the 'return of innovation' (Cerase, 1974: 251). The skills and knowledge possessed by these

returnees have the potential to contribute to much-needed reforms in the region's education system. The intentions and plans of these students are evident in their statements:

> *"I will provide counselling to students regarding various courses and opportunities and guide them on how to excel in different areas."* [Chandigarh 2021]

> *"I would like to motivate more and more students, specially girls to pursue higher education.* [Delhi 2021]

These responses shed light on the current state of education in the Ladakh region. Scholars (Ozer *et al*, 2021; Ozer *et al*, 2019; Williams-Oerberg, 2016) have discussed the shortcomings of Ladakh's education system, and the there students have been adversely affected by its deficiencies. This is a crucial finding in the context of this study and also reflects the challenges faced by students in urban areas. *These students have the potential to transform their society, as UNESCO (2013) stated: "people with higher knowledge and information can make a significant impact on people's lives. The sharing of knowledge and information they carry has the power to transform the social institutions and economy of society."* This finding demonstrates that these students are enthusiastic about applying their knowledge to improve the fragmented education system in their region once they complete their studies and return to their place of origin.

Conclusion

Migration from Ladakh is straightforward and can be linked to the dearth of higher educational opportunities in the region. In the context of migration among Ladakhis, no suitable study has been identified that researches these migratory patterns beyond the student perspectives. The findings also suggest that, due to a lack of educational opportunities in their region, young people are being forced to migrate from their homes to cities. However, survival in urban spaces is full of challenges for the students due to their identity. Moreover, the attitudes of mainlanders towards these students, within and outside the classroom are also emerging as a major concern. The finding shows that 87.17 per cent of students intended to return to their place of origin once they had finished their studies. The FGLs are facing more challenges than their counterparts of SGLs in terms of admission and the selection of college is a concern. However, the experiences of both FGLs and SGLs are found similar in terms of adjustment and integration. The aspect of job opportunity is found to have the largest impact on return decisions. The students in return dedicatedly want to improve the education system in their region.

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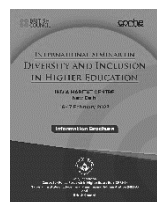
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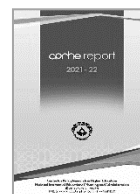**For more Publications, please log on to our website at http://www.niepa.ac.in/publications.aspx**

Experiences of International Students and Government Responses: A Study on COVID Times in India

Sumit Kumar [*]

Abstract

The National Education Policy (2020) stressed upon making India a global destination for higher education through internationalisation at home. The number of foreign students which got more than septuple in the last two decades categorically justifies this dream. Whether this dream can be realised in the post-COVID world or not would depend on the lockdown experiences of international students. Employing social networking theory of migration, it can easily be argued that the experiences of current students motivate or deter future students to earn degrees from that destination. Since a majority of international students enrolled in India belong to a very limited number of countries, therefore, their experiences are very pertinent. In addition, advisories, and policy documents drafted during the time of pandemic or after concerning foreign students would also help students to comprehend government's commitment towards internationalisation at home. In the backdrop of the above, the present study has made an attempt to document and analyse the experiences of foreign students and government responses. The primary data were collected through interviews of expatriates and the secondary data mainly from the websites of University Grants Commission and Study in India.

These have been analysed qualitatively. Results of the study suggest that the challenges related to mental health, finances, VISA, and teaching-learning process which had impacted international students across the globe could not get ample attention from policymakers. This can easily be blamed for the bad experiences of international students during the pandemic in India.

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India: A Global Destination for Foreign Students

India has been making efforts to become a knowledge-based economy (KBE) — an economy in which knowledge is created, acquired, transmitted, and used more effectively by individuals, enterprises, organizations, and communities to promote economic and social development (Powell & Snellman, 2004:201; Tocan, 2012: 200), from the very first dawn of the current century. India's unique growth trajectory propelled by a fast-growing service sector but without enough support from the manufacturing sector, particularly in the post-liberalisation era, has been the impetus behind the proposition of transformation into a KBE (Planning Commission, 2001: 08; Kumar, 2021: 169). The idea of KBE does get echoed in the National Education Policy (NEP) of 2020 wherein for visualising the dreams of a knowledge society and economy along with fulfilling the work-force requirements of the fourth industrial revolution, the readjustment, refurbishment, and re-energisation of the higher education (HE) system, at the earliest, have been stressed upon (Ministry of Human Resource and Development [MHRD], 2020:30).

Internationalisation of higher education (IHE) has been prescribed in the NEP 2020 for re-energising and revamping HE along with other structural changes. The General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) defines internationalisation as "the process of developing/implementing policies and programmes to integrate an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions, and provision of post-secondary education." This process can take place at the national, sectoral, or institutional level (Anandkrishnan, 2004: 10). Internationalisation involves the mobility of institutions, courses, academicians, and students. Since the policy document strives to make a global destination for international students, it therefore stresses the in-bound mobility of students and institutions (2004: 37) which brings it closer to the category of internationalisation at home (IAH) than any other category of internationalisation.

IAH has been defined as the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff so that they can make a meaningful contribution to society (Beelen & Jones, 2015: 10; Allen, 2020: 02). Inbound mobility of foreign students along with the updation and integration of curricula and programmes have been identified as indispensable tools for IAH (Wächter, 2000: 12; Allen, 2020: 04-06). Thus, IAH helps countries to take their HE sector to the international standards which restricts the out-mobility of home students in return. The abovementioned point justifies the policy objective of making India a global study destination and restoring its glorious past as the *Vishwa Guru* (NEP 2020: 39) through special attention to the IAH.

Before the NEP 2020 unfolded itself, the *Study in India* (2018) programme was launched as a concrete attempt to foster IAH which the following objectives do postulate. Those objectives were as below: (1) to improve the soft power of India with a focus on the neighbouring countries and use it as a tool in diplomacy, (2) to boost the number of inbound international students in India, (3) to double India's market share in the global education exports from less than 1 percent to 2 percent, (4) to increase the contribution of international students in the form of direct spends, indirect spends, spillover effects, (5) to improve the overall quality of higher education, (6) to better the global ranking of India as an educational destination, (7) to reduce the export-import imbalance in the number of international students, and (8) to enhance India's global market share of international

students (Press Bureau of India [PIB], 2018). The 'Study in India' programme intends to decuple the number of foreign students to 500,000 by 2024 by focussing on Asian and African students. For this purpose, the expansion of student support facilities like scholarships to 50,000 foreign students by 2024 has been proposed by the policymakers (Varghese, 2020: 135; Khare, 2018: 49).

Later in 2021, keeping the objectives of NEP 2020 in the backdrop, the University Grant Commission (UGC); the premier administrative body for the HE in the country, released *Guidelines for the Internationalisation of Higher Education*. This policy document lays down suggestive measures for the international exposure of the academic community and students as well. It stresses collaborative work for the teaching community and suggests the internationalisation of curriculum through the introduction of international dimensions to curricula. In addition, Twinning Arrangements that allow students who are enrolled with a higher education institution in India to complete part of their program at a partner institution located in another country are also mentioned in the guidelines (pp. 11-12). Besides, the document does talk about the integration of foreign students with local communities by assigning faculty mentors, host families, and student buddies to make their lives easy and enjoyable in India (p.10).

The recently notified document on the *setting up and operation of campuses of foreign higher educational institutions in India* by the UGC in 2023 is the latest attempt to foster IAH. This document aims to gravitate foreign students and arrest the out-mobility of home students by providing international exposure in the homeland. This is noteworthy that the *Foreign Education Provider (Regulation) Bill* (2010), and the *Higher Education and Research Bill* (2012) are the previous attempts to give entry to foreign education providers in India. Nevertheless, nothing significant was achieved through those bills (Yeravedakar & Tiwari, 2014), and therefore, the necessity of a new bill could have been felt.

Based on the recent strides in the form of bills and programmes, it can easily be argued that India is committed to becoming a global destination for foreign students to re-energise and revamp the HE system of the country through IAH. In return, on the one hand, it would facilitate the economic transformation of the country while, on the other hand, it would help to restore the past glory of *Vishwa Guru.*

However, India, in modern times, has never been a traditional destination but rather a source country. Constantly it has been home to the second largest community of mobile students. Although, in the last two decades the higher education market of the country has experienced unprecedented growth (6,988 in 2000 to 49,000 in 2021) with respect to the enrolments of international students (All India Survey for Higher Education [AISHE], 2021). But it had kept on losing its nationals to the HE market of foreign countries in ever-increasing staggering numbers and accordingly kept on losing money too. It is believed that India has the potential to earn about US$20 billion annually from the education sector as 7,35,000 immigrating Indian students spend about US$16 billion annually on their foreign degrees. This is noteworthy that the majority of Indian students spend 10-20 times more on those universities that are not premier universities (Niyazi & Sharma, 2020). Therefore, giving "value for money" education within India to such students through improving the quality of HE appeared as a bright option for policymakers. Since IAH has been identified as a tool for enhancing the quality of HE, therefore, the stress on IAH by the policymakers is justified.

In addition, despite having fewer numbers of top 200 universities and lesser scholarship provisions for foreign students than China, India houses almost the same number of South Asian students, barring Pakistani ones (Xavier, Chaba & Dang, 2020: 08). It underlines the potential of India as a regional destination which it has earned due to its education-related policies and its emergence as a regional economic power in the post-liberalised era (Khare, 2015: 27). The meteoric rise (6,988 in 2000 to 49,000 in 2021) in the enrolment of international students in the last two decades and the constantly increasing size of the Indian economy validate the recent emphasis given on becoming a global destination.

Covid Shock and Government Responses

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic. Consequently, most of the countries then imposed lockdowns, resulting in border closure and complete restrictions on mobility — internal as well as international (David *et al*, 2023). The sudden closures of borders along with the shift to online mode have affected the international mobility of students and staffs severely, and therefore the pandemic made internationalisation its first and foremost victim in the education sector (Rumbley, 2020). The evidence collected through a cross-country survey conducted by the United States Institute of International Education concerning international mobility of students in the four most preferred destinations — USA, Australia, UK, and Germany — also substantiates it. The survey results suggest that the number of fresh international students has declined by 46 per cent, 23per cent and 22per cent in 2021 from 2020 for the USA, Australia, and Germany respectively. However, the number of foreign students in the UK has remained almost unchanged. Inadequacy of data, in comparison to counterparts, has been blamed for such a pattern. Further, the survey also concluded that the credit-mobility (visiting students, and exchange students) was affected more severely than the mobility of students aspiring to earn degrees (Kercher, 2021). Such a decline was predicted by an overwhelming number of national and international reports therefore they speculated that universities would not going to host a large number of international students in the post-pandemic world (Fischer, 2020: i; Tesar, 2020: 556). However, against the early prediction, the UNESCO data for the following year of the pandemic says that the total number of migrants has increased but has diversified (UNESCO, 2022). Therefore, the emergence of new market players and the loss of reputation in the case of traditional players can easily be underlined.

Like the global leaders, India also imposed a lockdown immediately to throttle the spread of the COVID-19 virus which affected the higher education market of the country. The number of enrolled foreign students experienced a negative growth (almost 2per cent) in 2021 than the preceding year (AISHE, 2021). However, in comparison to the global market leaders, the higher education market in India did not suffer significantly. The near absence of exchange programs/twin-programs which are the most affected programs (Kercher, 2021) can easily be credited for lesser suffering in Indian higher education. Almost all expatriates are enrolled in full-time graduate, post-graduate, and research programmes. Therefore, a very limited number of students were affected by VISA-related issues.

It is noteworthy that comprehensive data are absent on HE of the post-COVID period and therefore nothing can be said emphatically about the present and immediate future of Indian higher education. However, based on the above-mentioned, it can easily be argued

that India is making committed efforts to become a global destination for international students in recent times. On the other hand, there is evidence-based speculation that the few new global leaders may rise in the post-pandemic world. Hence, it would not be cynical to recognise whether India is going to be one such leader or not.

The future of internationalisation of higher education would depend upon the COVID experiences of students in foreign lands. It can be argued employing the social network theory of migration that the already migrated individuals facilitate the process of migration of potential migrants through positive feedback, and necessary and timely information resulting in a reduction in the financial, social, and emotional burden of migration; only if their own experiences meet expectations (Light *et al*, 1989: 03-04; Massey *et al*, 1993: 433-434; De Haas, 2010: 1589-90; Porumbescu, 2015: 59; van Meeteren & Pereira, 2018: 927). Hence, the currently enrolled students have the potential to alter the decision of would-be migrants belonging to their networks. The role of such enrolled students becomes very prominent if the expatriates are coming from a limited number of countries which is the case of India. Excluding China and Pakistan, the neighbouring countries of India — Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Maldives — are home to 49 percent of the migrants. And if coupled with students of African origin, learners of neighbouring countries and African countries constitute almost 80 percent of the migrant students (AISHE, 2021: 137-140). Therefore, the good or bad experiences of such students can have a huge impact on India's dream of becoming a global destination. Hence, documenting the lived experiences of such influencers during the unforeseen times of COVID is very pertinent for India.

The main factors that determine the experiences of students in foreign lands are government policies and institution-level policies. Even though the autonomy of the institutions allows them to frame their policies but not beyond the broader frameworks outlined by the government policies. Hence, the role of government becomes very relevant during a once-in-a-century event like the COVID pandemic. All the decisions that have affected the expatriates, like the closure of borders, cancellation of flights, VISA restrictions, restraint on imparting education through physical mode, switch to online education, etc, were taken by the government. They kept on making their decisions stringent or relaxed based on the circumstances. The above-mentioned global trend was also applicable in India. During the pandemic period, the UGC released a myriad of advisories/notices to ensure the smooth functioning of HE in the country. However, those advisories were framed keeping the most vulnerable stakeholders of the HE system or not is a researchable topic to comprehend the government's approach towards its commitment to making India a global destination. In return, the reasons behind the good or the bad experiences of international students can also be appraised.

Objectives

Keeping the above mentioned backdrop in view, this study focuses on the following objectives:
1. To document foreign students' experiences during COVID lockdowns in the years— 2020 and 2021— in India.
2. To comprehend the government's responses with respect to the experiences of foreign students' during COVID lockdowns in India.

Methodology

This ex-post facto research follows a qualitative research approach and descriptive research design. However, it relies on primary as well as secondary data. Those foreign students who got stuck in India either in the lockdown phase of the year 2020 or COVID peaks during April to July 2021 or both have constituted the universe of the study. In all, 18 foreign students enrolled in Indian institutions, irrespective of the nature of their courses, were approached with semi-structured interview schedules using snowball sampling technique for the primary data collection. The interview schedule was framed to capture the COVID experiences of students during 2020 and 2021. 13 out of the 18 respondents were interviewed physically while the remaining students responded over phone calls. All the respondents belong to three higher education institutions located in the Delhi NCR.

On the other hand, secondary data for concluding the government's responses have been collected from multiple sources. Those sources are the UGC websites, the website of the *Study in India* programme, and the *Guidelines for the Internationalisation of Higher Education* (2021) released by the UGC. All the COVID-related notifications released by the UGC; the apex higher education body, in 2020 and 2021 were analysed to examine the immediate concerns and responses of the Government of India towards foreign students. However, the policy document on the Internationalisation of Higher Education in India released during the pandemic in 2021 and the website of the Study in India programme have been analysed to comprehend the present seriousness and future preparedness in case of similar events. To analyse the secondary data, the document analysis method was employed. Document analysis is a qualitative research technique that involves the systematic evaluation of electronic and physical documents to interpret them for acquiring an understanding of their meaning, and develop upon the information they provide (Bowen, 2009: 27). Hence, the results of the secondary data have helped in explaining the reasoning behind students' responses.

Themes for Primary Data Analysis

International evidence on COVID time has revealed that practical, academic, and psychological challenges; particularly relating to the rapid transition to online learning and the impact of social restrictions on integration with peers and well-being, and VISA restrictions have disrupted the lives of international students at their destinations (Lai *et al*, 2020; Kercher, 2021; Al-Oraibi *et al*, 2022; Marinoni & van't Land, 2020: 07-09). While, a qualitative survey conducted on international students enrolled in the Indian state of Kerala has concluded that health issues, inadequacy of financial resources, and VISA issues they experienced during the pandemic had forced them to change their opinion about studying in a foreign land (Belousova, 2021).

Based on the above sources of evidence, the present study has identified four major issues that have impacted international students- mental health, finances, VISA, and teaching-learning process. Accordingly, a semi-structured interview schedule has been prepared. In addition to the above-mentioned concerns, questions were also asked to know whether the students would continue their education in India or not, and whether would they refer any of their friends/relatives to pursue their higher education dreams in India or not. The responses have been analysed thematically and are given below.

Students' Profile

Out of the 18 respondents, 6 are from Asia and 12 are from Africa. 16 of the respondents are enrolled in bachelor programmes while 2 are in master courses. A majority of the students (14) were male. All students are enrolled in three institutions located in the Delhi NCR.

Mental Health Issues

International students are more susceptible to mental health issues like- anxiety, depression, etc than their local counterparts and even the general population. The accountable factors are -English incompetence, acculturative stress, social belonging, and perceived discrimination (Mbous, Mohamed & Rudisill, 2022). The sudden lockdown caused by the pandemic resulted in isolation for foreign students because travelling home became a problem not only because of extra cost but also because of the sudden closure of borders and cancellation of flights. In addition, student residences were closed and students were asked to leave. Students also did not receive special attention from their institutions and home or destination governments (Gabriels & Benke-Åberg, 2020). In such circumstances, those who were left behind must have felt stranded, hopeless, and helpless. Their hopelessness and helplessness might have impacted their mental health.

The state of helplessness can easily be sensed from the responses of every interviewee. Every respondent has shared that any phone call from family and friends was sufficient enough to raise their heartbeats. They have never faced such anxiety before. They were living in constant fear of not seeing their family again. It can be sensed from one such response that is given below.

> *"I was worried that I would not see my family again because of the lockdown and the cancellation of flights."* (Respondent 04)

A few of the students (4) were residing in rented flats while the remaining 14 were in their college hostels. In hostels, like the respondents, there were also a few other students who could not go home. Therefore, they had few known faces to interact with. However, those students who were staying in shared accommodation outside campus premises stated that their flat-mates had left for their respective countries while they left behind and stayed alone. Staying alone in times of unforeseen/unheard circumstances itself was the biggest challenge.

> *"I was feeling that by the time life would become normal, I would become mad. My phone and laptop were my friends. No one was there to meet or talk or hang out due to the lockdown. I was living like a prisoner."* (Respondent08)

Each of the students categorically said that they did not get any mental support of any kind from anyone be it individual/society/ institution.

Financial Concern

Given the fact that India does not provide work visas to foreign students, they rely on financial support coming from the channels of family or home government or scholarships provided by the host institution or Government of India. All the respondents identified their family as the sole source of funding and shared that they did not face any financial issues. The online provisions have been credited for smooth transactions.

"Did not face any cash crunch because money was coming to me likewise it was coming before the pandemic. My family business does not get affected by the pandemic so I was getting money regularly from my family." (Respondent 11)

However, two students from Afghanistan shared that they faced financial issues though not due to the COVID but due to the political instability at home.

"Back home we have a business of carpet. The Talibs have burnt our shops. Everything had turned into ashes." (Respondent 17)

Those students have found saviours in their known ones in India. In addition, the universities have also allowed students, irrespective of their nationality, to pay their fees in instalments, keeping the circular issued by the UGC on *Payment of Fees* dated 27th May 2020 in the backdrop. Even though, no special attention was given to foreign students but must have benefitted them too.

VISA Related Concern

Literature suggests that the life of VISAs got expired mainly for students enrolled in the final semester and students who have come for short exchange programs. Due to the sudden lockdown which restricted the mobility of humans as well as flights, such students must have suffered. On the other hand, the lives of VISAs of students in the mid/initial years of the degree programs have saved them from any such suffering.

All the respondents of the study were in the initial and mid-year of their academic program. Hence, they did not share anything on VISA related problems. However, the possibility that final-year students and those in short-term programmes (diploma/certificate/exchange) have faced challenges related to VISA, cannot be ruled out.

Teaching-Learning Process

Literature related to international students' experiences during the pandemic highlighted that institutions across the globe have switched to online mode without much preparation which has impacted the teaching-learning process. A global survey report engaging 424 full replies from unique higher education institutions (HEIs) of 109 countries have been found that COVID-19 has affected teaching and learning at almost all HEIs. Further, two-thirds of the respondents have reported that classroom teaching has been replaced by distance teaching and learning. This shift in the teaching process has induced several challenges- access to technical infrastructure, competencies and pedagogies for distance learning, and the requirements of specific fields of study. In response to the query about their experiences concerning the teaching-learning process, each of the respondents has highlighted that with the help of online mode institutions have made an attempt to cover

up the academic loss of students. But neither students nor teachers were prepared for that. Further, institutions could not provide technical support as they themselves were short of the necessary gadgets to make online education an apt alternative to the physical mode of education. Therefore, students were found unsatisfied. Students enrolled in practical/lab-based courses were found more unsatisfied (Marinoni & van't Land, 2020: 07-09). A few of the responses categorically highlight so.

> *"I am a student of nursing which is a practical-based course. Without interaction with patients or observing them, I cannot become a good nurse. Observations or interactions were not possible in the case of online education. Classes were not only boring but it was also tough to attend and complete every class due to network problems."* (Respondent 05)

The issue related to the network was highlighted by other students too.

> *"In my class, few of the students used to connect from remote locations. Every now and then they used to complain to teachers about network errors by saying either their voice was not audible or breaking. The frequency of such complaints was enough to break the flow of any class."* (Respondent 14)

Since teachers were supposed to complete the syllabus within a stipulated time, they started sharing materials and giving assignments without having any discussion on the topic. Owing to this fact, students felt that their level of understanding would be lesser than their seniors. Hence, they were very concerned about post-education opportunities, keeping the tough competition of the labour market into consideration.

Future Plans and References to Future Students

In response to the question about their plan to complete their current degree, 12 students (65 per cent) responded negatively. However, the other 6 (35per cent) were in favour of completing it. All the female students were among the ones who responded positively. Those students who responded positively were the ones who said that they would suggest their relatives and known ones to consider India as the destination for their higher education. On the other hand, those who were disappointed were categorically of the opinion that they would not refer India to anyone.

Out of the four themes, finance-related matters did not bother any interviewees but Afghan nationals for which political instability at home can be blamed. Similarly, VISA-related issues were not raised by the interviewees. The limited sample size may be responsible for not capturing the varying opinions. However, concerns related to mental health and online education have been raised by the majority of the respondents. Those experiences were sufficient enough to motivate almost 35per cent of respondents to discontinue their higher education.

Secondary Data Analysis

The secondary data for this study were collected from multiple sources. They included the website of "Study in India," advisories released by the UGC from March 2020 to December 2021 concerning higher education institutions (HEIs) in the country, and the document titled *Guidelines on the Internationalisation of Higher Education.* Each one of

them was analysed separately with the objective to comprehend the government's attempts in the past, present and future. UGC's notifications were the guiding forces for HEIs during the aforementioned period. Therefore, it has helped in understanding the responses of HEIs toward students during the pandemic. However, the website of "Study in India," which is maintained by EDCIL, a Miniratna Central Public Sector Enterprise under MoE, was scrutinised well before the beginning of the academic year 2022-23 to comprehend the priorities of India's higher education market with respect to the current and the future international students. The guidelines released by the MoE for internationalisation have been reviewed to comprehend the response of HEIs in case of the reoccurrence of any endemic/pandemic in the future. Thus, the analysis of secondary data has helped in comprehending the past, the present, and the future planning concerning international students in India. Accordingly, the secondary data analysis has been mentioned in three categories as given below.

The Past (UGC's Notifications)

From March 2020 to December 2021, UGC; the apex body of HEIs, released 44 notifications for the seamless functioning of HEIs amidst the outbreak of the pandemic. Out of those notifications, there was only one instance wherein international/foreign students were mentioned. The detail of that singular instance is written below.

"Institutions should have a plan ready for such international students who could not join the program due to international travel restrictions or visa-related issues. Online teaching-learning arrangements should also be made for them" (UGC, 5th November 2020).

This instance considers the possibility of the suffering of students due to visa-related issues therefore the notification suggested to provide online education facilities to international students too. In addition, UGC has also identified the possibility of financial hardship; therefore, it has suggested HEIs be considerate to the payment of fees.

"It is requested, that in view of the prevailing extraordinary difficult circumstances, universities and colleges may consider the matter regarding payment of annual/semester fees, tuition fees, examination fees, etc. sympathetically and if feasible, may consider offering alternative payment options to students till the situation returns to normal. If need be, the universities and colleges may also consider individual requests from students, received if any, concerning payment of fees, in a considerate manner, keeping in view the present COVID-19 pandemic." (UGC, 27th May 2020)

The above-mentioned notification was for all students irrespective of their nationality. Therefore, the possibility that it must have benefitted expatriates too can easily be argued.

The Present (Study in India)

The website of the "Study in "India" programme aims to facilitate the admission of foreign students by providing all the relevant information at one virtual location. This website was scrutinised at a point when the website has started accepting application forms for the academic year of 2022-23. The intent was to comprehend the preparation that has been made to captivate international students. All the headings and sub-headings mentioned on the website have been presented in a tabular format to reflect on the government's attempts.

TABLE 1

Headings of the Website of "Study in "India" Programme

Headings on the Website Page	Sub-Headings
Study in India	• About study in India • 10 reasons to study in India • Indian higher education
Discover in India	• Things to do in India • Quick facts • Emerging India • Know India
Courses	• Regular courses
Plan Your Stay	• Onboarding & FRRO • Plan your Budget • Local Support • Travel and Accommodation
Fee Waivers	
How to Apply	• 5 Steps (Register here, Plan your budget, Submit application, Check results, prepare your departure) • Eligibility Criteria
SII Blogs	• Preparing For India (Start your Academic Journey in India, Managing your expenses as an International student in India) • Student Life (Study in multicultural land of India, A Story To Tell About Living In Hostel, Unfamiliar Territories and How to Feel at Home) • Social Life (What the World can Imbibe from Indian Culture, Made In India, Now Gone Global) • SII Program (Indian Education - Towards Growth, Learning and Success, India, A Home Away From Home, Top 10 Career Paths to Explore in the Next Decade)

Source: "Study in "India" programme website, as on 26th March, 2022

Since India hosts foreign students mainly from African and South Asian countries wherein only a limited section of the population got vaccinated, the relevance of health advisory for the current or aspiring students becomes more pertinent. However, from the table, it is clear that despite the pandemic, no health advisory for foreign students was mentioned anywhere on the website which reflects the government's carelessness and apathy, and doubts its commitment to make India a global destination.

The Future (Guidelines for the Internationalisation of Higher Education by UGC, MoE)

In the middle of the pandemic, in July 2021, the UGC released a document on internationalisation. Therefore, it would not be hyperbole to expect a few lessons that the world as well as India have experienced to be the guiding force for internationalization in the future. Researchers around the world have identified health (physical and mental), VISA, Online education, and finance related problems as the challenges faced by international students during the pandemic.

The policy document directly does not talk about health provisions for the expatriates. Similarly, Visa-related and financial issues did not get any mention. However, only online education attracted the attention of policymakers. The policy document has emphasised Information and Communication Technology (ICT) based internationalisation through MOOCS, the creation of e-content and video lessons, streamlining the form and processes of admission of foreign students using ICT, collection and analysis of data on preferences and needs of foreign students including prospective students, effectively responding to the demand of students with the help of ICT based learning tools and collaborative learning, exploring pedagogical opportunities of ICT in internationalization, etc (UGC, 2021: 13-14).

Whether the abovementioned measures have been suggested based on the pandemic experiences or not cannot be concluded but this can easily be argued that the proposed measures would minimise/resolve the problems associated with online education. However, all other challenges have been overlooked.

Conclusion

Challenges faced during the lockdown had varying effects on students, depending upon their background. The propensity that students belonging to foreign countries get affected more adversely than their local counterparts is very high because the absence of social capital and cultural capital can easily aggravate the problem. In such cases, support from the local population and government appears as the last hope to them. Those challenges that impacted foreign students are the teaching-learning process (online education), financing of education, VISA-related issues, and mental health. Among the four, challenges related to mental health and teaching-learning process have affected almost all the respondents. However, financial hardship during the lockdown was raised by the Afghan nationals only, and for which political turmoil that occurred during the same time at home has been blamed. None of the respondents has raised VISA-related challenges.

The analysis of secondary data categorically suggests that despite identifying the above challenges, UGC; the apex body of HEIs in the country, did not come out with any notice/circular that solely was meant to address the concerns of international students. Similarly, the policy document titled Guidelines for Internationalisation of Higher Education released by UGC has no special column wherein the challenges/concerns of foreign students got a mention. In addition, the website of Study in India has completely given a miss to the health advisory which possibly could help international students to plan their safe stay in India. The above-mentioned can easily be blamed for more negative responses (65 per cent)

than positive responses (35 per cent) of students in response to questions on completion of higher education and suggesting anyone else to join HEIs of India.

Policy Discussion

In the wake of the COVID-19, the possibility to follow up a bachelor's degree abroad with a master's degree in the same host country got enhanced. It is because looking for a job in the middle of a pandemic is certainly not a promising option for most of the recent graduates (Kercher, 2021). Therefore, it can be argued that the demand for Indian higher education would remain intact or may increase. In order to capitalise on that possibility, policymakers should pay attention to the voices of impacted students because those students would be very instrumental in making India a global destination by captivating students of their networks.

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Book Reviews

Sharma, Gunjan (2021): *Schooling and Aspirations in the Urban Margins: Ethnography of Education in the Indian Context*, Routledge, pp. 157, Price: ₹ 995.00

The scholarly discourse has placed greater emphasis on the multidisciplinary confluence of urban studies and education in recent years. The convergence has created a hub of intersecting possibilities, offering a fertile ground for academic research. Beyond simple juxtaposition, these domains merge to provide a more comprehensive view of the overlapping influences that are inherent to urban and educational processes. The emerging subject not only uncovers complex insights but also emphasises how important it is to understand the urban spaces holistically by adding educational components. In this review, we explore how a scholarly work traverses the complex relationship between urban studies and education, looking at its approaches and the consequences in the context of education marginality.

The global economic dynamics underwent a radical transformation in India after the 1980s, which profoundly altered the country's urban landscape and, most notably, the number and arrangement of slum settlements. Economic policies prevalent during this time encountered significant changes, moving away from conventional models and towards a more liberalised approach. These worldwide structural changes — which were shaped by neoliberal ideologies — showed up in India as trade liberalisation, economic reforms, and incentives for foreign direct investment. Policies changed, leading to an unprecedented growth and a massive migration of people from rural to urban areas. The combination of these elements caused slum settlements to become a noticeable aspect of the urban landscape. The proliferation of informal settlements, which are typified by poor living conditions, scant infrastructure, and a lack of basic amenities, was facilitated by the migrant inflow as well as by the lack of employment opportunities and meagre urban planning. Additionally, the global economic restructuring made it easier for economic clusters to emerge in urban areas, which accentuated socioeconomic gaps. These clusters coexisted with developing slum areas, resulting in glaring contrasts between wealth and poverty in close quarters. The physical appearance of slums close to economic hubs highlighted the intricate interactions between the localised urban realities and the forces of globalisation.

Gunjan Sharma's academic endeavour, Schooling and Aspirations in the Urban Margins, provides a comprehensive ethnographic analysis of an urban slum and a sarkari (government run) school situated within its boundaries. This urban environment unfolds in the aftermath of liberalisation, marked by significant internal migration and the swift expansion of urban peripheries. Sharma's research project originates from her academic area focused on marginality and education – while she perceptively notes that despite the continuous initiatives aimed at enhancing educational access over the years, social exclusion

persists as a formidable obstacle. The ethnographic lens towards an urban slum offers a unique field for inquiry within the broader academic landscape. This methodological choice allows for an in-depth examination of the intricate dynamics prevalent in informal settlements, commonly referred to as basti, within urban settings. The basti, characterised by informality and often constrained by suboptimal infrastructure, serves as a microcosm through which the complexities of broader urban studies unfold. The exploration unveils not only the socio-economic factors and cultural norms shaping the basti but also sheds light on the resilience employed by its inhabitants in navigating their daily environment.

The overarching inquiry of the book is based on a number of pivotal themes. First and foremost, she tries to understand how a state-run school fits in with the intricate web of an urban slum. Second, she explores the various viewpoints and interpretations that various stakeholders have within this environment, exploring how they conceptualise education and schools. Thirdly, Sharma carefully scrutinises the complex role that schools play in society, serving as both a social and educational institution that shapes the hopes and worldviews of young people living on the outskirts of society. She also looks at the complex interactions between these educational processes and caste and class issues, highlighting their significant impact on the lives of marginalised urban children. This critical approach highlights the investigation's multidimensional nature and its potential contributions to the larger conversation about marginalisation and urban education.

The book unfolds with a meticulously organised structure, consisting of eight chapters. In its initial segment spanning the first four chapters the narrative commences by establishing a theoretical foundation, conducting a comprehensive review of relevant literature, discussing methodological considerations, and offering a preliminary overview of the selected research site – that is deconstructing the slum. This section's thorough analysis of pertinent literature not only clarifies the state of scholarship today, but it also places the research in the larger context of scholarly discourse. By defining the scholarship from which the study originates, this positioning helps readers comprehend the theoretical foundations that will define the subsequent chapters. The research methodologies utilised are carefully described by the author, providing readers with an understanding of the methods selected, the reasoning behind their choice, and the consequences for the analysis that follows. In addition, Sharma also defines the slum and the school as a preliminary synopsis of the chosen research site – contextually and geographically. Readers are given a fundamental understanding of the distinct socio-cultural, economic, and spatial dynamics that define the urban environment under examination by this overview of the field of study. As a result, the research site starts to play a more significant role in influencing the next investigation into the complex interactions between urban settings and educational phenomena than just serving as a backdrop.

Gunjan Sharma dedicates a substantial portion of her work to contextualising the research environment, elucidating her social positioning and the disparities from those under investigation. The seamless integration of the research process with the problem and subsequent analysis is noteworthy. Sharma's detailed exposition on the intricacies of site selection, the deliberate collaboration with a non-governmental organisation (NGO), the pivotal role of a gatekeeper, and the assiduous efforts to cultivate rapport with the community provides uncomfortable yet invaluable insights into the convergent realms shared by social researchers and their subjects.

Playing a pivotal role in the narrative, the next section [Chapter 5, titled "The Idea of the Sarkari School"] delves deeply into the myriad instruments that collectively shape the state-administered school within the slum. The book's central theme revolves around the urban slum that lies on Delhi's outskirts and is reminiscent of many other 'peri-urban' areas in the country. This area, also known as the slum by the drain, is home to newly arrived migrants and rehabilitation colonies, set against the ruins of an old agricultural village. Sadly, this nomenclature has widespread associations with filth, which adds to the unfortunate stigmatisation of its residents, who are sometimes wrongly assigned criminal designations. A number of the residents living in this settlement, especially the children, end up working in unstable jobs. Informal conversations with the author reveal the rise of caste-based discrimination, despite the resident's claims that caste is irrelevant or non-existent in this situation. Transitioning from the slum environment to the school setting unveils discussions surrounding 'missing children' – those conspicuously absent from school. In reality, these children engage in occupations such as rag-picking or scrap collecting, their absence reflecting the harsh socio-economic realities they grapple with. Again, within the classroom milieu, children from the slum are often perceived through a lens that depreciates their worth. Labelled as 'not good enough,' they are stigmatised with perceptions of inadequate home environments. This perpetuation of damaging stereotypes within the educational institution contributes to the normalisation of a cycle that is both violent and unjust.

Following this, the next section [Chapter 6: "The Teacher and the School Culture"] explores the dynamics between the school and its immediate surroundings, with a specific focus on the teachers themselves and the school culture. In delving into the intricate dynamics between public education and marginalized communities, a nuanced perspective becomes imperative. Within an educational landscape marked by increasing diversification and the endorsement of school choice, privatisation often assumes a central role. Paradoxically, public educational institutions, despite occasional practices that counter the interests of the economically disadvantaged, remain the sole recourse for marginalised populations. The chapter also highlights the profound nature of social hierarchies in the school. Within the institutional framework, teachers were characterised as subdued authorities; however, when viewed from an external vantage point, they seemed to perpetuate and maintain the status quo, thus diminishing their efficacy in addressing both their own and others' social circumstances. In this particular scenario, the absence of the conventional role associated with teaching, namely the transmission of the curriculum, raised inquiries into the construction of teachers' 'power.' This query underscored the imperative to reconceptualise the politics surrounding school knowledge and the functioning of the hidden curriculum embedded in educational contexts. Sharma also states how within the classroom, teachers resort to punitive measures, employing corporal punishment and verbal abuse. Many students bear the burden of tasks such as cleaning premises and running errands for them, especially girls who are deemed 'good girls' if they do the work. The teachers' perceptions of the community were evident in these instances, revealing a notion of the community as uncivilised, morally astray, and socially deviant 'Other.' The teachers additionally instituted a set of behavioural guidelines for the children to adhere to – including the guideline not to make physical contact with the teacher and to uphold a certain physical distance from them.

Next, Chapter 7 ["Childhood in the Margins"] serves as an enlightening portal into the world of the children, and also where experiences of caste and class-based struggles are unveiled. This chapter achieves its objective by presenting the narratives of the children, exploring their responses to stories, and delving into their experiences of engaging in work. The author presents partial responses from children who share some semblance of similarity, aiming to grasp their 'perceptions of class and caste.' It is also realised that punishment manifested as an all-encompassing force in the children's lived reality, reaching a point where they appeared to accept it as an inherent aspect of their existence. The extent to which the violation of their respect and bodily integrity had been internalised was such that the children had become habituated to physical violence, rendering them incapable of critically analysing their circumstances. When posed with questions that necessitated a reflection on their experiences, the children either evaded engagement or redirected the conversation to alternative topics. However, a more comprehensive contextualisation of participants underpinning the stories, might have given a richer narrative to this segment. The book proceeds further with the exploration of the role of aspirations within the broader context of educational experiences of the marginalised urban communities. The discernment arises that the school environment and the concept of education fail to cultivate an experiential foundation that could inspire children in marginalised contexts to formulate their own "hopes" and "aspirations." Despite the children attributing value to school education, the absence of role models to affirm this valuation becomes apparent. However, the analysis predominantly revolves around tropes like 'bada admi' (big man) or 'amir admi' (rich man), constraining the scope of this examination. A multifaceted exploration of aspirations within the realm of education and urban marginality could provide a richer understanding of how aspirations can serve as catalysts for positive transformation within these communities.

In the last chapter, the part focussing on children and their engagement in work, raises issues that remain underexplored by education researchers. Given that numerous children participate in labour, often in hazardous conditions, their reliance on one another to navigate the intricate realm of adults, law enforcement, and legal regulations exposes a dimension largely overlooked in childhood and education research. This facet warrants further scholarly inquiry to comprehensively understand the challenges faced by working children in such environments.

The intersection of urban marginality and education in India has, sadly, been overlooked to some extent. Gunjan Sharma's work, therefore, represents an important and positive step in that direction. Sharma's book illuminates a neglected aspect of the educational landscape by exploring the complex dynamics within marginalised communities and the difficulties faced by children on the margins. Her examination of the relationship between the researcher and the researched, along with her perceptive analyses, greatly advances our knowledge of the ways in which urban environments and educational experiences interact, especially concerning the often-disdained children of the margins. This book is a poignant reminder of why it is important to address the complexity of urban education for a more equitable educational future.

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