

THE SOURCES OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY FOR DROPOUT STUDENTS IN INDIA: PATHWAYS TO MAINSTREAMING AND INCLUSION

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ABSTRACT

Education is not only a system of teaching; it is fundamental to human growth and the social transformation of inherent human capabilities and existence. In India, a considerable proportion of children and adolescents are deprived of this essential right owing to their withdrawal from formal education. The phenomenon of dropout is fundamentally entrenched in social, cultural, and institutional disparities that deprive millions of the chance to realize their potential. This article investigates the causes and effects of school dropout in India, analyzes current and new educational opportunities for dropout children, and proposes humanistic and policy-driven solutions to aid their reintegration into mainstream education. The discourse corresponds with the ethos of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which aspires to provide inclusive and equitable education for all individuals. This research emphasizes both official and informal pathways—such as open schooling, skill development programs, digital education, and community-based initiatives—that might enable dropouts to restore their educational pursuits and reintegrate into the socio-educational mainstream.

Keywords: School Dropouts, Open Schooling, AICU, NEP-2020, Inclusion, Mainstreaming

1.0 INTRODUCTION: Education as a Human Right and a Lifelong Journey

Education, in its truest sense, is the process through which individuals grow intellectually, morally, emotionally, and socially. It is both a personal journey and a collective responsibility. The Indian Constitution recognizes education as a fundamental right under Article 21A, mandating free and compulsory education for children between 6 and 14 years. However, despite the progress made in literacy rates and school enrolments, a large segment of India's youth remains excluded from the formal education system due to dropout at various stages. According to UNICEF and UDISE+ reports, while enrolment in primary education is near universal, dropout rates sharply rise at the secondary and senior secondary levels: especially among children from marginalized communities, rural backgrounds, and low-income households. The dropout phenomenon is not just a statistical concern; it represents the loss of human potential, creativity, and agency. It widens the gap between privilege and deprivation and undermines national goals of equity and inclusion. Understanding the sources of educational opportunity for dropout students therefore requires not just a systemic analysis but a humanistic lens—one that sees education as empowerment, not just schooling; as participation, not mere attendance; and as liberation, not conformity.

2.0 UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM: The Nature and Scale of Dropout in India

School dropout refers to the discontinuation of schooling before completing the prescribed course of study. Dropout can be temporary (interrupted schooling) or permanent (complete withdrawal). The reasons are multidimensional—economic, social, cultural, psychological, and institutional.

According to UDISE+ 2022–23, the dropout rate in India was around:

- 1.5% at the primary level,
- 7% at the upper primary level, and
- 12% at the secondary level.

The higher the grade, the more pronounced the dropout. Rural areas, tribal regions, and urban slums witness higher dropout rates, particularly among girls, scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and economically weaker sections.

This pattern reveals systemic inequities. While the government has introduced numerous schemes—like the Mid-Day Meal Programme, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA), and Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA 2.0)—barriers persist in translating enrolment into retention and meaningful learning.

3.0 CAUSES OF SCHOOL DROPOUT: A Humanistic Interpretation

The reasons for dropout cannot be confined to poverty or access alone; they are often layered with emotional, social, and psychological dimensions. Understanding these causes is the first step toward creating opportunities for re-entry.

3.1 Economic Constraints

Poverty remains the most dominant cause. Many children, especially in rural and marginalized families, drop out to supplement family income through labor. For adolescent girls, unpaid domestic chores or care work often take precedence over schooling.

Even when education is free, indirect costs—such as uniforms, books, transportation, and examination fees—become burdensome. The opportunity cost of schooling thus outweighs its perceived benefits for many poor families.

3.2 Socio-cultural Barriers

Social norms, gender bias, early marriage, caste-based discrimination, and parental illiteracy act as cultural deterrents. Girls face additional challenges such as lack of separate toilets, safety concerns, and expectations of early marriage or household responsibility.

In tribal and remote communities, traditional occupations and migration patterns lead to seasonal discontinuity in schooling.

3.3 Institutional Factors

Rigid curricula, language barriers, irrelevant content, and teacher absenteeism contribute to student disengagement. When learners fail to connect classroom knowledge with real-life experience, schooling becomes alienating. The lack of child-centered pedagogy and counseling mechanisms further alienates students, leading to absenteeism and eventual dropout.

3.4 Psychological and Emotional Factors

Low self-esteem, lack of motivation, bullying, and fear of failure are emotional factors that push children away from schools. Many children internalize failure as personal inadequacy rather than systemic fault.

3.5 Migration and Displacement

Seasonal or distress migration, urban relocation, and displacement due to conflict or natural disasters disrupt education continuity. Children of migrant workers often fall through the cracks of state and school databases.

3.6 Pandemic-related Learning Loss

The COVID-19 pandemic deepened existing inequalities. The shift to online education excluded millions of students lacking devices, connectivity, or digital literacy, leading to increased dropouts, especially among rural and disadvantaged learners.

4.0 SOURCES OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR DROPOUT STUDENTS

Reintegrating dropout students into education requires a multipronged approach that blends formal, non-formal, and informal learning systems. India has developed a range of opportunities through institutional, technological, and community mechanisms. These sources can be grouped under the following categories:

4.1 Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Systems

The National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS), established in 1989, is the largest open schooling system in the world. It offers flexible, learner-centered programs equivalent to secondary and senior secondary education. Through accredited institutions, study centers, and digital platforms, NIOS enables learners to continue education without the rigid constraints of age, schedule, or place. Many State Open Schools (SOS)—like Bihar, Rajasthan, and Maharashtra State Open Schools—provide regionally relevant curricula and support services. These open learning systems offer hope to students who dropped out due to personal or economic reasons, giving them a second chance to complete formal education.

4.2 Vocational Education and Skill Development Programs

For many dropout students, skill-based education serves as an immediate and meaningful alternative. The National Skill Development Mission (NSDM), Skill India, and Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) focus on linking education with employability.

Vocational courses in areas like carpentry, tailoring, beauty and wellness, computer operations, or electrical maintenance not only provide livelihoods but also build confidence. Many programs now integrate academic equivalency certificates, enabling learners to return to formal education while acquiring practical skills.

4.3 Non-formal and Alternative Education Centres

Under the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan, alternative and innovative education (AIE) centers, residential bridge courses, and remedial learning programs are conducted for out-of-school children. NGOs and civil society groups—like Pratham, Azim Premji Foundation, Teach for India, and Save the Children—run innovative learning models that bridge academic gaps and prepare children for mainstream reintegration. These centers often use local language, experiential learning, and play-based methods that respect children's pace and context.

4.4 Academic Intensive Care Unit (AICU)

Is a targeted educational intervention designed to mainstream dropout and marginalized students, especially from Madrasas, into formal schooling.

- AICU stands for Academic Intensive Care Unit, an innovative educational initiative pioneered by the Shaheen Group of Institutions.
- It is modeled after the concept of a medical ICU, but applied to academics—providing focused, remedial, and accelerated learning support to students who are at risk of academic failure or have dropped out.

Objectives of AICU

- Mainstream madrasa and dropout students from Grades 1 to 12 into the formal education system.
- Bridge learning gaps through intensive academic support.
- Empower students from marginalized communities with quality education from KG to UG.
- Customized learning plans tailored to each student's academic level.
- Daily assessments and mentoring to track progress.
- Dedicated faculty and structured schedules to ensure consistent improvement.
- Focus on language, mathematics, and science as foundational pillars.

Implementation

- Successfully implemented in Bidar, Karnataka and other regions by the Shaheen Educational Society.
- Proven track record with a 100% success rate over 15 years in reintegrating students into mainstream education.

This model is a powerful example of how educational innovation can address systemic dropout issues and promote inclusive learning.

4.5 Bridge Courses

Bridge courses are short-term, focused educational programs designed to help students transition smoothly between different levels or streams of education. These courses aim to fill learning gaps, especially for students moving from non-formal or alternative education systems—such as Madrasas or vocational tracks—into mainstream academic curricula. By reinforcing foundational concepts in subjects like language, mathematics, and science, bridge courses build the academic confidence and readiness needed for success in the new environment. They are particularly effective in promoting equity and inclusion, ensuring that all learners, regardless of their background, have a fair opportunity to thrive in formal education settings.

4.6 Digital and Online Learning Platforms

Digital education has opened new frontiers for inclusive learning. Platforms like SWAYAM, DIKSHA, ePathshala, and PM eVIDYA provide free and open educational resources (OERs) accessible via mobile devices. Community radio, television (SWAYAM Prabha DTH channels), and offline digital content (on tablets or SD cards) have made education more accessible to remote learners. For dropout students, flexible and blended learning options create self-paced opportunities to continue education while working. The NEP 2020 strongly advocates for leveraging technology to reduce dropout and enhance access.

4.7 Community-based and NGO Initiatives

Grassroots organizations play a transformative role in reaching the unreached. Community Learning Centers (CLCs), youth clubs, and literacy missions act as catalysts for local participation.

For instance:

- The Lok Jumbish and Mahila Samakhya programs in Rajasthan and Bihar mobilized women and community groups to re-enroll girls.
- The Pratham “Second Chance” program helps adolescent girls complete their secondary education.
- Digital Saksharta Abhiyan (DISHA) and National Literacy Mission empower adult dropouts to gain functional literacy and digital competence.

These humanistic initiatives restore dignity, confidence, and belonging—essential foundations for lifelong learning.

4.8 Residential Bridge Schools and Seasonal Hostels

Special residential schools for marginalized children, such as Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBVs), Navodaya Vidyalayas, and Ashram Shalas—provide safe spaces for children from remote or migratory families. Seasonal hostels in tribal belts allow children to continue schooling even when their parents migrate for work.

4.9 Inclusive Education and Flexible Schooling Models

The NEP 2020 emphasizes “flexible curricula, multiple pathways, and credit transfer systems” for lifelong learning. It promotes vocational-academic integration and Alternative Learning Pathways (ALPs), enabling students to exit and re-enter the education system without penalty. The Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) and National Credit Framework (NCrF) extend this flexibility beyond school to higher education and skill training, fostering a continuum of learning.

5.0 HUMANISTIC APPROACHES TO MAINSTREAMING DROPOUT STUDENTS

Beyond policy and programs, reintegrating dropouts requires empathy, understanding, and contextual sensitivity. A humanistic approach places the learner at the center—acknowledging their lived experiences, aspirations, and dignity.

5.1 Education with Dignity and Belonging

Dropout students often return to learning with low confidence or a sense of failure. Schools must create welcoming environments where learners feel valued. Counseling, peer support, and mentoring can rebuild self-esteem and motivation.

5.2 Child-centered and Experiential Pedagogy

Flexible, activity-based, and culturally relevant pedagogy helps reconnect learners with the joy of learning. Learning through art, stories, crafts, and community projects makes education meaningful.

5.3 Gender-sensitive and Inclusive Practices

For girls and differently-abled students, safety, accessibility, and representation are crucial. Female teachers, menstrual hygiene facilities, and inclusive curricula encourage retention and participation.

5.4 Family and Community Engagement

Parental literacy, awareness, and participation influence school continuity. Community mobilization through School Management Committees (SMCs), local panchayats, and parent-teacher associations enhances accountability and ownership.

5.5 Use of Local Knowledge and Context

Integrating indigenous knowledge, local languages, and community issues into curricula helps learners connect classroom learning with real life. For example, in tribal regions, schools can blend traditional ecological knowledge with modern science.

6.0 REMEDIES AND POLICY MEASURES FOR MAINSTREAMING DROPOUTS

To bridge the gap between access and equity, India needs systemic, coordinated, and compassionate interventions.

6.1 Strengthening Early Warning and Tracking Systems

Using digital tools like UDISE+, Aadhaar-linked school databases, and Child Tracking Systems, states can identify children at risk of dropout and provide timely interventions.

6.2 Bridging and Transition Courses

Short-term bridge courses with flexible timing help learners reintegrate into age-appropriate classes. Residential camps for migrant children during off-seasons ensure continuity.

6.3 Integration of Formal and Non-formal Systems

A seamless credit system between open schooling, vocational training, and formal schools allows mobility. Recognizing prior learning (RPL) ensures that skills acquired outside the classroom are validated.

6.4 Financial Incentives and Conditional Support

Scholarships, free transport, bicycles for girls, mid-day meals, and conditional cash transfers encourage re-enrolment. The NEP 2020 calls for expanding these supports for socially and economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs).

6.5 Digital Inclusion

Affordable devices, community ICT hubs, and offline learning packages can bridge the digital divide. Training teachers in digital pedagogy ensures that technology enhances inclusion, not exclusion.

6.6 Collaboration between Stakeholders

Government agencies, NGOs, private sector, and local communities must collaborate. The role of local governance institutions—panchayats and urban local bodies—is crucial for identifying and supporting out-of-school children.

6.7 Monitoring and Research

Continuous research on dropout dynamics, gender disparities, and regional variations will inform evidence-based policymaking. Feedback mechanisms should involve learners and families to ensure responsiveness.

7.0 FUTURE PROSPECTS: Reimagining Education for All

The National Education Policy 2020 envisions India as a global knowledge society rooted in equity, access, and lifelong learning. Its focus on “Universalization of Education from Pre-school to Secondary Level by 2030” aligns with the UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG-4).

Future educational reforms must continue to emphasize:

- Flexible, modular learning systems with multiple entry and exit points.
- Integration of vocational and academic streams to reduce dropout.
- Digital equity and multilingual educational resources.
- Empathetic teacher education, preparing educators to support diverse learners.
- Strong community-school partnerships, ensuring that no child is left behind.

The humanistic vision of NEP 2020 reminds us that education is not merely about literacy or employment—it is about building human capacities, moral values, and self-realization.

8.0 CONCLUSION

Dropout from education is not the end of a learner's journey but a pause—a pause that can be bridged through opportunity, compassion, and innovation. India's experience shows that with the right mix of policy support, community engagement, and flexible learning mechanisms, dropout students can return to the path of knowledge and empowerment. Education must not be seen as a privilege of the few but as a lifelong right of every individual. Through open schooling, digital learning, skill development, and inclusive pedagogy, India can convert every "lost" learner into a "reclaimed" citizen—capable of contributing to both personal and national development. The path forward lies not only in reforming systems but in reaffirming the human spirit of education—a spirit that believes every child, regardless of background or circumstance, deserves a chance to learn, grow, and flourish.

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