Post-COVID Decline in Government College Admissions in India: Structural Barriers, Policy Gaps, and the Crisis of Higher Education

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Abstract

This qualitative study critically examines the sharp decline in student admissions to government colleges in India in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on socio-economically marginalised states such as Jharkhand, Bihar, West Bengal, and Uttar Pradesh. Drawing from recent government data, academic research, and policy critiques, the paper explores how structural inequalities exacerbated by the digital divide, economic hardship, and political apathy have eroded trust in public higher education. It highlights the limited effectiveness of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, whose ambitious reforms often overlook ground realities such as inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, and the ongoing caste-based discrimination within academic institutions. Additionally, the rise of online and AI-based learning platforms, privatisation trends, and shifting youth aspirations toward short-term vocational courses and content creation further contribute to the crisis. The paper concludes that without inclusive, well-funded, and regionally adaptable interventions, the public education system risks deepening social exclusion and losing its relevance in contemporary India.

Keywords: India, COVID-19, (NEP) 2020, Admissions Crisis, Higher Education

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered an unprecedented disruption in the global education system, and in India, this crisis exposed and deepened long-standing structural inequalities, particularly in access to higher education. With the sudden closure of schools and colleges, online learning was rapidly adopted as an emergency measure. However, this transition disproportionately affected students from marginalised and economically vulnerable communities, particularly in states like Jharkhand, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal. The digital divide proved to be a major barrier, as a significant number of students lacked access to smartphones, stable internet, or digital literacy required to meaningfully engage with online platforms (*Azim Premji Foundation*, 2021). Despite governmental efforts to distribute digital devices and financial aid (*FE Online*, 2021). D), many students either did not receive the promised support or were unable to benefit due to inadequate infrastructure and guidance. Those who did gain access to smartphones often fell prey to digital addiction, diverting their attention to entertainment platforms like YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram rather than academic resources, resulting in shortened attention spans and diminished interest in structured learning (*The Guardian*, 2023).

The impact of this disruption became more evident after schools and colleges reopened. Students, especially from rural and underprivileged backgrounds, found it difficult to reintegrate into formal education. Many dropped out entirely due to economic distress, family responsibilities, or the lure of quick income through informal labour, gig work, or digital content creation (Addis, 2024; *CNBC-TV18*, 2024). This shift away from education was particularly severe among those who had just completed their Class 12 examinations, leading to a visible decline in college enrolment across government institutions (*Ministry of Education*, 2023). Moreover, the rollout of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, though ambitious in its vision of flexibility, digitisation, and inclusivity, failed to consider the lived realities of these students. NEP's structural overhauls—such as the elimination of the MPhil program, the introduction of four-year undergraduate degrees, and the push for a centralized credit system created confusion and alienation, particularly in non-metropolitan areas where institutional readiness remains poor (Tilak 2020; Reshma & Vaddiraju, et al. 2023). Caste-based discrimination also continues to shape the educational experiences of Dalit and Adivasi students, who often encounter social exclusion, academic bias, and institutional neglect within campuses (Bhati, 2024; Thorat & Newman, 2012). These barriers compound the economic and infrastructural challenges, making higher education seem irrelevant or inaccessible to millions.

As private and online alternatives gain popularity due to their perceived practicality, speed, and economic viability, government colleges are facing a crisis of credibility and purpose. Many students now opt for short-term vocational courses, professional diplomas, or content creation careers instead of enrolling in traditional degree programs. This shift reflects not only a transformation in youth aspirations but also a growing distrust in the capacity of public institutions to provide meaningful education and employment opportunities (*India Today*, 2024). In this context, this article aims to critically examine the multifaceted causes behind the post-COVID decline in government college admissions in India. Drawing on qualitative data, government reports, policy analyses, and media accounts, the study seeks to uncover how digital exclusion, economic hardship, caste discrimination, policy misalignment, and institutional decay have collectively undermined the public higher education system's ability to retain and empower the nation's youth. This article is based on secondary sources such as news reports, government policies, published articles, and personal observations to explore the probable reasons behind the decline in student admissions to government colleges in India.

National Education Policy (NEP) 2020

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, approved by the Union Cabinet on July 29, 2020, is India's first major policy overhaul in education since 1986. It introduces structural changes such as the shift from the 10+2 model to a 5+3+3+4 school format, the promotion of mother-tongue instruction until at least Grade 5, a four-year flexible undergraduate program, and the establishment of institutions like the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) and the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) (*Ministry of Education*, 2020). The policy aims to increase the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education to 50% by 2035 and ensure inclusive and equitable quality education.

However, implementation challenges have raised concerns across sectors. One of the most significant issues is infrastructure inadequacy, especially in rural regions. Many schools and colleges lack basic amenities such as electricity, internet, libraries, or digital tools (Kumar, 2020). The ambitious integration of online platforms like DIKSHA and the National Digital Education Architecture (NDEAR) has had limited impact due to the digital divide—only about 30% of rural Indian households have reliable internet

access (*NITI Aayog*, 2021). This inequality hampers access to learning materials and assessments, disadvantaging large sections of the student population.

Funding gaps compound these infrastructural issues. The NEP recommends allocating 6% of GDP to education, but India's expenditure remains around 3 % (Shah, 2024). This shortfall undermines the policy's capacity to establish new universities, strengthen existing institutions, and recruit trained faculty. Building the necessary infrastructure to implement reforms—like state-of-the-art labs, digital classrooms, and interdisciplinary research centers requires significant investment (Qamar & Sharma, 2023).

Faculty preparedness also poses a challenge. According to (TOI, 2024; Mehta, 2022), many institutions lack adequately trained teachers capable of delivering NEP's multidisciplinary, outcome-based curricula. Teacher training initiatives such as NISHTHA and PMMMNMTT have been implemented, but reach remains inconsistent. The Delhi University Teachers' Association (DUTA) has raised alarms about overburdened faculty, decreased core teaching credits, and administrative overloads stemming from continuous internal assessments and new academic structures (DUTA, 2021).

Further, the language policy recommending instruction in the mother tongue until Grade 5 has met resistance in non-Hindi-speaking states. In Tamil Nadu, Education Minister Anbil Mahesh Poyyamozhi criticised the three-language formula as an attempt at Hindi imposition and asserted that the state would continue with its two-language system (*The Hindu*, 2025). West Bengal has also voiced concern over central encroachment on state education rights (Times of India, 2024). These federal tensions underscore NEP's challenge of balancing national standardisation with regional linguistic and cultural autonomy.

Beyond administrative and logistical barriers, NEP appears to be influencing college admission trends. A 2024 survey in Karnataka found that 96% of students distrusted the multiple entry-exit flexibility provided by the new four-year degree structure, fearing it would affect employability (*New Indian Express*, 2024). Similarly, 97% of students and parents expressed confusion about how the credit system works. Shailendra Deolankar, Director of Higher Education in Maharashtra, revealed that many universities are enrolling fewer than 100 students per year, highlighting a serious concern regarding the policy's immediate impact on enrolment (*Times of India*, 2024). In West Bengal, undergraduate admissions through the Centralised Admission Portal (CAP) have been delayed due to legal uncertainty over OBC reservation lists, leaving many colleges with vacant seats even after multiple deadline extensions (*Times of India*, 2025).

The centralised admission system, such as the Unified University College Management System (UUCMS), while efficient for administrative purposes, has excluded students with limited digital access. This was especially evident during the 2022–24 admission cycles, where rural dropouts surged due to online-only registration processes (*New Indian Express*, 2024). Critics argue that instead of democratising access, NEP is creating new layers of exclusion for economically and socially disadvantaged groups.

Academicians and educational activists have criticised the commercialisation of higher education under NEP. The reliance on public-private partnerships (PPPs), loans through the Higher Education Financing Agency (HEFA), and privatised digital learning platforms may inflate tuition fees and restrict access for marginalised communities (Jha, 2021). The All India Forum for Right to Education (AIFRTE) and the Students' Federation of India (SFI) have pointed out that NEP undermines public education and favours elite private institutions (AIFRTE, 2021). Moreover, the policy eliminates the MPhil program, previously a crucial stepping stone for PhD aspirants, without offering a clear alternative (Ramakrishnan 2020).

At the pedagogical level, institutions like Delhi University and St. Xavier's College in Kolkata have criticised the dilution of core subject material (*The Indian Express*, 2025). Literature courses, for instance, have seen major canonical works reduced to excerpts, raising concerns about the depth of academic

learning (*Indian Express*, 2023). Teachers report increased workloads due to NEP's modular assessments, electives, and continuous evaluation systems, all while managing overcrowded classrooms.

Despite its vision, NEP suffers from a gap between policy and practice. Successful execution requires phased, context-sensitive rollouts, adequate funding, infrastructure enhancement, and rigorous teacher training. There must also be room for states to adapt the policy according to their regional realities. Without addressing these fundamental issues, NEP risks exacerbating inequalities rather than resolving them. National Education Policy 2020 aims to revolutionise India's education system but faces several hurdles in its path. Declining college admissions, faculty discontent, infrastructural deficiencies, and regional opposition reflect deeper systemic gaps (TOI, 2024). For NEP to fulfil its transformative promise, policymakers must prioritise inclusive and well-funded implementation strategies while engaging meaningfully with educators, students, and state governments.

Caste Discrimination

In India, the deeply entrenched caste system continues to exert a profound influence on access to higher education. Although affirmative action policies, such as reservations for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs), were introduced to ensure educational equity, recent evidence suggests that caste-based discrimination remains a significant barrier, discouraging Dalit and Adivasi students from pursuing or continuing higher education.

Several studies highlight that caste related hostility, exclusion, and institutional bias have created a hostile academic environment, particularly for SC/ST students. The National Dalit Movement for Justice (Bhati, 2024) reported that discriminatory practices such as segregation in hostels, exclusion from research groups, and biased grading persist in many Indian universities (Bhati, 2024). These experiences often lead to psychological distress, dropouts, and reluctance among marginalised students to apply or continue in college (Thorat & Newman, 2012). Moreover, caste linked discrimination affects aspirational and motivational levels. A 2022 report by the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE, 2024) noted a decline in SC and ST enrolment rates in premier institutions, including IITs and IIMs, despite increased seat reservations (*Ministry of Education*, 2022). Cases of suicides by Dalit students like Rohith Vemula at the University of Hyderabad in 2016 have drawn national attention to caste-based alienation in campuses (Chaudhuri, 2016). Such incidents signal a climate of exclusion, which deters Dalit-Bahujan students from aspiring for higher education.

Institutional barriers, such as lack of language support for first-generation learners, limited faculty diversity, and poor implementation of grievance redressal mechanisms, further discourage enrolment (Nambissan, 2013). While the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 claims to focus on equity, it fails to address systemic caste hierarchies in curriculum, faculty representation, and pedagogy (Teltumbde & Khilnani, 2018). It not only affects the psychological safety of marginalised students but also contributes to a notable decline in their admission and retention rates.

Lack of Class Attendance policies

One major reason for the decreasing number of students attending college in India in post-covid time is the lack of strict rules regarding class attendance. In many government and rural colleges, students are not required to maintain a minimum attendance to appear in exams. This leads to irregular class habits and low academic engagement. Without a clear policy or enforcement, students lose motivation to attend daily classes, especially when they can pass exams through last-minute preparation or by using guidebooks.

Teachers too become demotivated when classes are empty, further lowering the quality of teaching. Over time, this system creates a cycle of poor learning outcomes and loss of interest in higher education. As a result, many students either drop out or avoid college entirely. For improving student strength, colleges must implement clear and enforced attendance rules along with student counselling and academic support systems.

Lack of proper infrastructure

In post-COVID India, the lack of proper infrastructure in many colleges has led to a decline in student admissions. Poor classroom conditions, inadequate sanitation, lack of digital tools, and limited internet access discourage students from continuing higher education, especially in rural areas. According to Manash Pratim Gohain (2025), infrastructure plays a key role in students' retention and learning motivation. During the pandemic, online learning widened the digital divide, making students in under-resourced colleges feel left behind. Without smart classrooms, libraries, or laboratories, colleges fail to meet the basic expectations of students in the new normal era (Mishra, 2025).

Lack of Teachers

In the post-COVID period, the shortage of qualified teachers has become a serious concern in Indian higher education, especially in rural and government colleges. Many institutions have a large number of vacant teaching posts, leading to irregular classes and poor academic support. According to Younis Ahmad Sheikh (2017), a lack of permanent faculty affects students' learning experience and reduces their interest in continuing college education. During the pandemic, this problem became more visible as most colleges were unable to conduct proper online classes due to teacher shortages. Without regular classes, mentoring, and feedback, students feel disconnected and often drop out or choose not to take admission. This situation damages the reputation of such colleges and discourages new students.

Government colleges across India face serious disruptions due to irregular teacher appointments and chronic faculty shortages. Departments often rely on guest or ad-hoc lecturers, leading to irregular classes and diminished academic standards. For instance, government colleges in Indore currently have over 300 vacant teaching posts (*Times of India*, 2025), while Maharashtra reports nearly 11,900 assistant professor vacancies obstructing NEP rollout (Pandit, 2025). Additionally, Punjab saw the Supreme Court annul 1,158 assistant professor appointments due to procedural lapses, exacerbating staffing instability (*Express News Service*, 2025). Such systemic gaps discourage student enrolment, as parents and learners seek institutions with certified and consistent teaching faculties.

Lack of Education Budget

The lack of sufficient budget allocation to education is a major reason for the crisis in higher education in India, especially in the post-COVID era. Low funding leads to poor infrastructure, shortage of teachers, outdated curriculum, and minimal research opportunities. According to the Sivapriyan (2025) and Singh (2025), India spends less than 3% of its GDP on education, far below the global average. Experts like Tilak (2020) argue that without proper investment, public universities cannot compete with private institutions or meet the needs of disadvantaged students. The result is a steady decline in college admissions, especially in rural and government colleges, where students face the worst conditions.

Political Apathy Toward Education and Employment in India

In India, political agendas often prioritise short-term populist measures over long-term structural reforms in education and employment. Rarely do mainstream political campaigns emphasise the need for qualitative education or dignified employment. A significant concern raised by social thinkers and educationists is that political leaders tend to avoid investing in robust education systems, fearing that an informed and educated citizenry would begin to demand accountability, employment, and social justice (Borah, 2012). Instead, political parties frequently rely on welfare schemes such as small cash transfers to women, old-age pensions, or free ration distribution to secure votes (Ray & Ghosh, 2023). These schemes, though helpful for immediate survival, discourage people from aspiring to higher education or stable employment.

This trend is especially visible in underdeveloped states like Jharkhand, Bihar, and parts of West Bengal, where government schools and colleges are facing severe shortages of both students and faculty. In many rural colleges, student enrolment has drastically declined, and teaching posts remain vacant for years. Some government colleges are even on the verge of closure due to the absence of students and functioning administration (Singh, 2020; Choudhary 2023). The lack of political will to address these crises reflects a systemic neglect of education as a tool for empowerment. Instead of equipping youth with the skills and knowledge to question injustice, the political machinery seems to prefer maintaining a dependent and politically passive electorate.

Privatisation in Education

The rapid expansion of privatisation in higher education has significantly harmed government colleges in India, leading to reduced admissions. Private institutions offer superior infrastructure, aggressive marketing, and flexible course structures, drawing students away from public colleges (Pandey, 2025). Critics argue this trend reinforces socioeconomic disparities, as poorer students struggle to afford private education, and government institutions lack funds to compete (Choudhury & Tilak, 2021). Political actors have also accused privatisation of disenfranchising marginalised communities by excluding PDA (Pichhde, Dalit, and minority) youth (Yadav, 2025). Meanwhile, government colleges face declining enrolment, prompting fee waivers and sponsorship programs to remain viable (*TOI*, 2025). Without robust state investment and regulation to revitalise public institutions, privatisation will continue to erode equitable access to higher education in India.

Impact of Online and AI-Based Learning

In the post-COVID era, the rise of online teaching platforms and AI-based learning tools has significantly affected the admission rate in Indian government colleges and universities. Many students now prefer online education due to its flexibility, lower cost, and personalized learning options powered by AI (Varthana, 2024). Private EdTech companies like Byju's and Unacademy offer advanced digital content, which government institutions often lack due to limited infrastructure and training (Tewary, 2023). As a result, students are shifting away from traditional degree programs, leading to a sharp decline in public college enrolments (Ramachandran, 2025). Experts warn that without strong digital policies and AI integration in public education; government colleges will continue to lose relevance in the changing academic landscape.

Socio-Economic Disillusionment

In recent years, the decline in government job opportunities, rising corruption in recruitment processes, and uncertainty in the private sector have deeply demotivated students and parents from pursuing higher education, especially in government colleges and universities. According to (Jigeesh, 2024), rising unemployment and frequent job exam delays have eroded trust in the system. *Express News Service* (2024, February 6). reported that incidents of bribery and paper leaks in government recruitment exams have further discouraged youth. Moreover, many students view private jobs as insecure and underpaid, while others are turning to freelancing and gig work as alternatives (*ET Online*, 2024,). Political favouritism and caste-based bias in job selection also play a role in student disinterest ("Caste and Careers," 2025). This growing perception that education does not guarantee stable employment is a key factor behind declining admission rates in India.

In recent years, India has witnessed a sharp decline in fresh admissions to government colleges and universities due to several interrelated academic and structural issues. A major concern is the lack of quality education in these institutions. Many colleges continue to use backdated syllabi, failing to incorporate modern knowledge systems or industry-oriented skills, which leaves students disinterested in traditional learning models (Bharucha, 2024). Additionally, there is little innovation in teaching methods, and assessment practices often lack transparency and consistency, particularly in the distribution of marks. This outdated framework restricts creativity and critical thinking among students. The National Education Policy 2020 aimed to address such issues, but its implementation has been slow and inconsistent. Reports show that even with fee waivers and faculty-sponsored admissions, many government colleges are unable to attract students (*Times of India*, 2025a). In places like Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh, colleges have received minimal response despite starting provisional admissions (*Times of India*, 2025b). The rigid structure, unresponsive to the changing needs of the job market and higher education standards, pushes students toward private institutions or alternative education modes. Unless the government undertakes significant reforms in syllabus, pedagogy, and evaluation systems, the trust deficit in public higher education will continue to grow.

In the current socio-economic landscape, many students are shifting away from traditional degree programs due to a growing preference for short-term, income-generating opportunities. The four-year BA course is often seen as time-consuming, especially when paired with delayed admissions and prolonged academic calendars in government institutions (*Times of India*, 2025). This lack of efficiency and the growing impatience among students—driven by economic pressures—have made private and online alternatives more appealing. According to Bharucha (2024), the demand for quicker education-to-employment pathways reflects a structural gap in public higher education that must be urgently addressed to retain student interest.

Interest in Professional Courses

Today's students are steering away from traditional degrees and are flocking toward career-focused professional courses like engineering, paramedical sciences, nursing, pharmacy, and polytechnic diplomas. These programs promise faster employment, hands-on training, and industry-relevant skills unlike many outdated government college courses (Gupta, 2023). The growing demand for such professional fields reflects students' aspirations for financial independence and job security. A report by *India Today* (2024) highlights that enrolment in professional institutes has surged, while many public

universities struggle with admissions. Without curriculum reforms and industry tie-ups, general degree colleges risk losing their appeal in an age where students prioritise speed, skill, and stability.

Social Media Addiction

Apart from academic concerns, several socio-psychological issues are pushing students away from seeking admission to colleges, especially government institutions. One major factor is social media addiction, which affects students' concentration, motivation, and emotional well-being. According to a survey by the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (Sehrawat & Pandey, 2023), over 60% of college-aged youth suffer from screen dependency, leading to declining academic engagement. Moreover, many institutions lack proper psychological counselling and support systems to help students navigate stress, anxiety, or career confusion. The continued incidents of ragging and, in some unfortunate cases, sexual harassment further damage the image of these institutions. A report of Srivastava & Srivastava, (2024, July 27) revealed that many students avoid hostel life or campus-based learning due to safety concerns. Without robust anti-ragging policies, active counselling cells, and digital awareness campaigns, many colleges are failing to create a safe, welcoming environment contributing to the steady drop in admissions. A growing number of Indian students are shifting away from formal education and competitive academic pursuits, instead choosing to build careers as content creators on platforms like YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp etc. This trend reflects a larger shift in youth aspirations, where digital creativity is seen as more fulfilling and financially promising than traditional education. According to a report by *CNBC-TV18* (2024), 83% of Gen Z in India now consider themselves content creators. This creator economy is thriving due to the accessibility of smartphones, affordable internet, and monetisation options across platforms. Furthermore, a *Times of India* (2024) article highlights that many creative jobs in the content industry do not require formal degrees, drawing more students into the digital space. As a result, students spend increasing amounts of time producing videos, vlogs, and brand content rather than attending college, indicating a major cultural and economic shift in how the younger generation views career development.

Dirty Politics in Student Unions

Dirty politics in student unions is emerging as another reason for the declining interest in college admissions, particularly in public institutions. Instead of focusing on academic welfare and student rights, many unions become platforms for political parties to promote their agendas. This often leads to campus violence, biased representation, and administrative deadlock. According to Mukherjee (2013), several state-run universities have reported a rise in student clashes due to politically influenced unions, which directly impacts campus safety and academic culture. As a result, many students and parents are avoiding such institutions, preferring peaceful and politically neutral learning environments.

Economic hardship

Economic hardship continues to be a significant barrier for students from marginalised and low-income backgrounds when it comes to accessing higher education. Private colleges, which often have better infrastructure and job-linked courses, charge high fees that are unaffordable for many poor students. On the other hand, government colleges lack adequate facilities, updated curricula, or placement opportunities, making them less appealing despite lower costs (Sharma, 2022). Additionally, many students from economically disadvantaged families are forced to support their parents through agricultural

work, daily labour, or small businesses, leaving little time or resources for formal education (Tilak & Choudhury, 2021). As a result, even if seats are available, these students often miss admission deadlines or drop out early. Without a strong system of scholarships, counselling, or flexible education models, they are denied fair opportunities. Addressing this requires targeted government intervention and greater support systems in both public and private institutions.

Preparing for Competitive Exams

Many students in India, after completing their 12th grade, choose to prepare for competitive exams instead of enrolling in regular college courses. Exams for government jobs such as SSC, railway, banking, and defence are seen as more promising for long-term job security. A report by Somayya (2023), indicates that over half of Indian youths aged 18–24 are not in formal education but are engaged in exam preparation. Additionally, some opt for short-term professional courses or coaching programs. This shift reflects a growing lack of faith in traditional degrees and their limited employability.

Absence of Proper Training and Placement Cells

One of the key reasons behind declining interest in government colleges is the absence of proper training and placement cells. Unlike private institutions that actively connect students with industries through internships, workshops, and campus placements, most government colleges lack structured career support. According to a UGC report (2023), less than 30% of public colleges in India have functional placement cells. As a result, students feel disconnected from real-world job opportunities and turn to private or skill-based institutions. Without dedicated career guidance, students lose motivation, making higher education seem unrelated to future employment.

Distance Education

Many students today are opting for open and distance education systems to manage both education and other responsibilities like part-time work or household tasks. These flexible learning modes allow them to earn income or support family duties while continuing their studies at their own pace. According to the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU, 2023), enrolment in distance learning programs has steadily increased, especially among women and economically weaker sections. The rising cost of full-time education and the need for economic contribution make open education a practical alternative for many, reshaping the landscape of higher education in India (Das & Das, 2021).

A significant portion of India's population lives in poverty and lacks educational awareness, which directly impacts college enrolment rates. Many parents, particularly in rural and marginalised communities, do not fully realize the long-term value of higher education. According to a UNESCO report (2022), millions of Indian families prioritise short-term survival over long-term academic investment, often pushing children into work instead of college. This lack of consciousness stems from generational illiteracy, socio-economic struggles, and poor access to career information. Without strong grassroots-level awareness programs, college education remains a distant dream for many young Indians.

Conclusion:

The decline in government college admissions in post-COVID India reflects a deepening crisis in the nation's higher education system. While the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 aspires to transform education through digitalisation, flexibility, and inclusivity, its implementation has often intensified

existing inequalities, particularly for students from rural, marginalised, and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. A convergence of factors ranging from faculty shortages, infrastructural decay, digital divides, and outdated curricula to caste-based discrimination, lack of political commitment, and economic instability has eroded trust in public education. Simultaneously, the rise of privatised education, online platforms, and alternative career paths highlights a shifting student mindset driven by practicality, financial pressure, and distrust in traditional degrees. To reverse this trend, a radical restructuring is needed rooted in increased public investment, teacher empowerment, decentralised policy execution, robust career support, and a renewed focus on equity and social justice. Without such transformative steps, the promise of higher education as a tool for liberation and mobility will remain out of reach for millions of Indian youths.

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