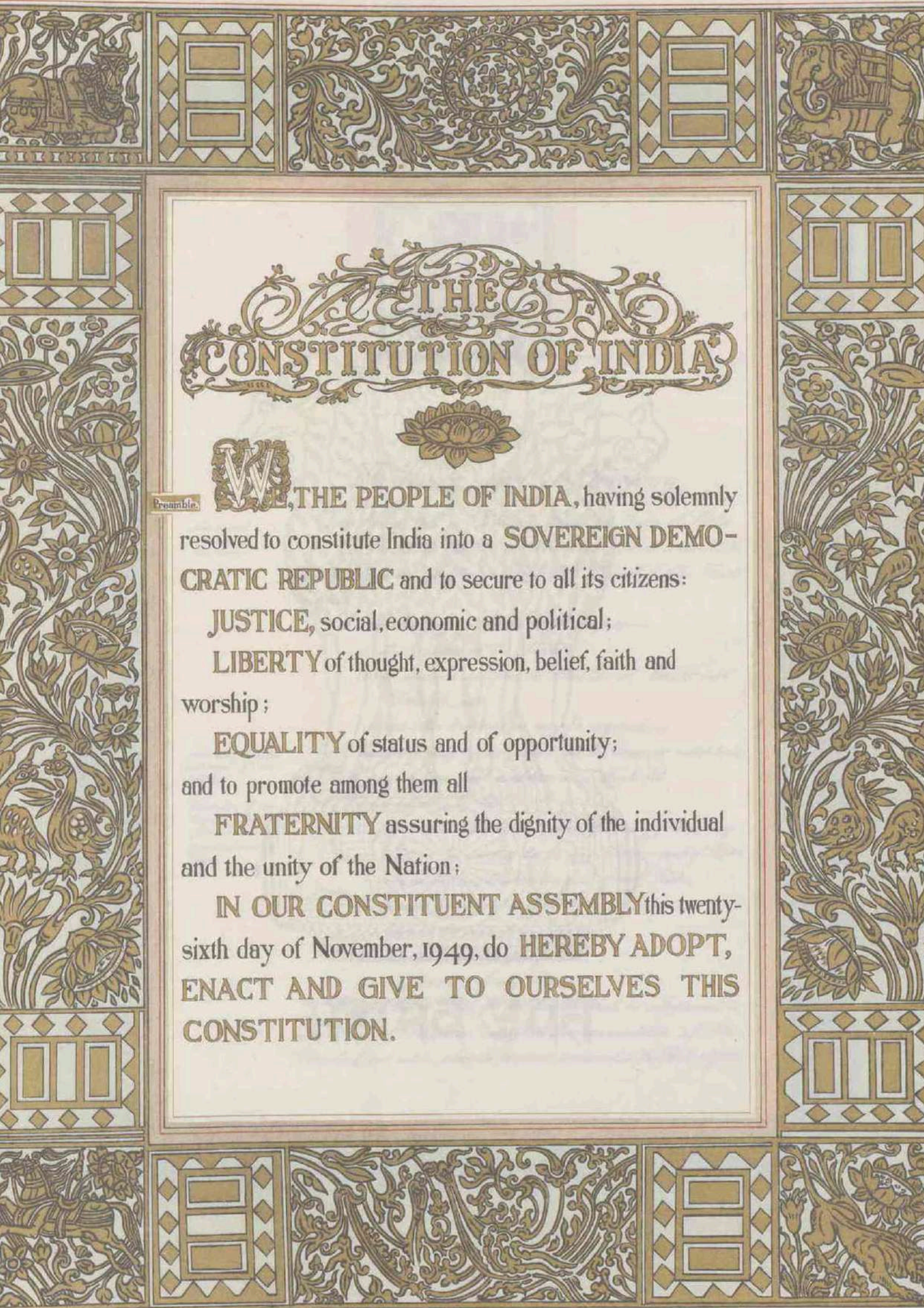


REACHING FOR THE STARS

A PRIMER ON INCREASING THE
ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION FOR
ASPIRATIONAL SECTIONS

Amrit Mahapatra
Agrima Gupta

Office of Krishna Prasad Tenneti
MP, Bapatla



THE CONSTITUTION OF INDIA



Preamble.



WE, THE PEOPLE OF INDIA, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a **SOVEREIGN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC** and to secure to all its citizens:

JUSTICE, social, economic and political;

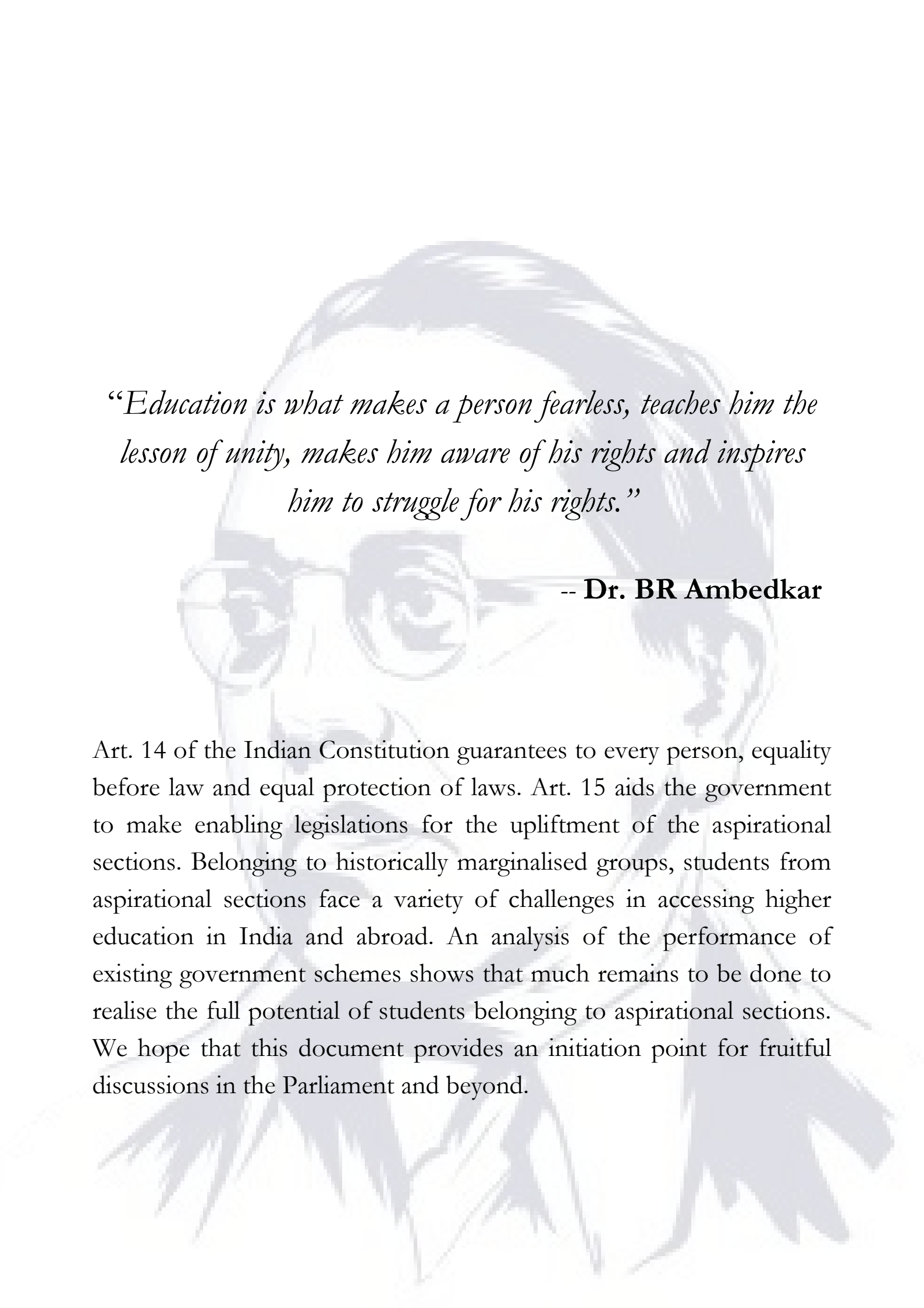
LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship ;

EQUALITY of status and of opportunity;

and to promote among them all

FRATERNITY assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity of the Nation ;

IN OUR CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY this twenty-sixth day of November, 1949, do **HEREBY ADOPT, ENACT AND GIVE TO OURSELVES THIS CONSTITUTION.**

A large, faded, light blue portrait of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar is centered in the background of the page. He is wearing his characteristic round glasses and a white shirt with a dark tie. The portrait is semi-transparent, allowing the text to be read over it.

“Education is what makes a person fearless, teaches him the lesson of unity, makes him aware of his rights and inspires him to struggle for his rights.”

-- Dr. BR Ambedkar

Art. 14 of the Indian Constitution guarantees to every person, equality before law and equal protection of laws. Art. 15 aids the government to make enabling legislations for the upliftment of the aspirational sections. Belonging to historically marginalised groups, students from aspirational sections face a variety of challenges in accessing higher education in India and abroad. An analysis of the performance of existing government schemes shows that much remains to be done to realise the full potential of students belonging to aspirational sections. We hope that this document provides an initiation point for fruitful discussions in the Parliament and beyond.

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FOREWORD



After having spent over three decades in public service as an IPS officer, I am embarking on a new innings as a Member of Parliament. To that end, I aim at taking up issues of public welfare to drive inclusive growth. Constituting a major chunk of the Indian population, the contributions of aspirational sections to the economy and society cannot be emphasised enough. It is important therefore, to encourage inclusive growth by ensuring equitable access to higher education for all, including students belonging to aspirational sections.

My vision as a Member of Parliament is to ensure the laws enacted by this hallowed house reach the remotest corners of the country. To that end, I believe the importance of **setting practical targets, using key performance indicators (KPIs), clear methodologies, and impact assessment** is all the more enhanced. In this primer, the focus has been to evaluate the access of aspirational sections to higher education through suggesting policy changes and reviewing the existing framework. A major observation has been that either there have not been mechanisms to evaluate policies or if at all they do exist, they are not presented or accessible in a uniform manner.

This report, published by my office, intends to throw light on the status of aspirational sections' ability to access higher education in India and overseas. It is a primer, based on questions asked in the Houses of Parliament, reports of its committees, and other compendiums of national and global publications that are relevant to the same. I hope that this document nudges both the Parliament as well as the government to enact requisite changes.

Krishna Prasad Tenneti
(MP, Bapatla, Andhra Pradesh)

Reaching for the Stars: A Primer on Increasing the Access to Higher Education for Aspirational Sections

Higher education in India is a civilizational story, something that dates back millennia and paints the picture of a rich culture where emphasis was laid on learning and arts. Nalanda University, operational from about the 5th Century A.D. was famous not only for producing Buddhist scholars of repute but also training students in politics, war studies, astronomy and the like.¹ Historians consider it to be one of the first universities of the world which attracted pupils from different countries of South-East Asia and beyond. Apart from residential facilities for both teachers and students, it encompassed a plethora of literary texts and manuscripts too.

Takshashila, which predates Nalanda could also be considered to be a seat of higher learning. Although it did not possess the same facilities as Nalanda, there have been references to the former as the place where the famed Chanakya taught. It also holds significance in Buddhist traditions.

As the centuries passed, the mode and medium of education also evolved. The *gurukuls*, *chatuspathis*, and *tois* slowly metamorphosed into schools and colleges where modern sciences and arts were taught. A major push behind this was also the advent of colonialism in India and the influx of western notions of knowledge. Multiple committees were also formed to explore expansion and consolidation of the education architecture in India, mostly to serve imperial ends.

HIGHLIGHT BOX 1: EVOLUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA

Nalanda University: Operational from 5th century AD; produced Buddhist scholars.

Takshashila: Significant in Buddhist traditions; Chanakya taught here.

Girls' School in Bhide Wada: Established by Savitribai Phule in 1848.

Raleigh Commission: Led to the passage of the Universities Act, 1904.

The Raleigh Commission report which led to the passing of the Universities Act during the tenure of Lord Curzon was criticized for the recommendation to expand the powers of the government. While there was an interplay between forces of colonial interests and nationalism, enough focus was not being directed towards the marginalized communities and aspirational sections. Interpretation of religious texts and doctrines by sections with vested interests had stripped these communities of the

right to pursue education. They were subject to social disabilities and ghettoized to perform a select few tasks which were menial in nature.

A breath of fresh air was felt on the arrival of Jyotiba Phule and his wife, Savitribai Phule onto the scene. *Satyashodhak Samaj*, established by him, campaigned for scientific and rational thoughts as well as rights to the so-called untouchables. Supplemented by his efforts, Savitribai also established in 1848, arguably India's first school for girls at Bhide Wada in Pune.² Similarly, Gopal Baba Walangkar published the *Vital Vidhwanshak* which tried to raise the awareness among aspirational sections of the disabilities and oppression that they were subject to. These efforts crescendoed in the rise of Dr. B.R Ambedkar and his historical achievement of securing affirmative action in education.

However, even after more than 75 years of independence and policies to ensure inclusive growth, the battle is far from over. In reply to a parliamentary question, the Union government stated in December, 2023 that over the past five years, 13,600 students from reserved categories have dropped out from central universities, IITs, and IIMs.³



This is a grim picture that should nudge us to introspect. The nature of discrimination faced by these sections is mostly intersectional encompassing a mix of caste and class. Ascribed privileges of a person based on their place of birth, community, and caste do determine to a large extent the access to opportunities including education.

N. Sukumar in his book, 'Caste Discrimination and Exclusion in Indian Universities', writes, "*In a caste-based society which prevails in India, socio-cultural capital attains significance when one considers that students are slotted into categories of 'weak' and 'good' based on both a normative and normalizing judgement of the institution or through the value judgements of the upper caste teacher/ students.*"⁴

In this primer, the aim shall be to explore the disabilities and discrimination faced by students from the SC, ST, OBC communities and the institutional structures in place to ameliorate that. It shall also discuss domestic and global best practices on increasing the accessibility to higher education which one hopes becomes the initiation point for Parliament to take the debate forward.

I. Enrolment and Dropout Among Aspirational Sections

Between 2017-18 and 2021-22, the growth in the number of students enrolled in higher education has been 18.1% whereas the corresponding number for the SC community has been 25.43%, higher than the overall average. Similarly, ST enrolment saw a 41.6% increase and OBC enrolment saw a 27.3% increase, reflecting the growth that has happened in India in providing access to higher education to aspirational sections.⁵

HIGHLIGHT BOX 2: ASPIRATIONAL SECTIONS AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Enrolment in Higher Education: From 2017-18 and 2021-22, enrolment among SC students increased by 25.43% and among the ST students, by 41.6%.

Suicides by students: In that last five years, Out of 31 cases of suicides in IITs, 17 were from either the SC, ST, OBC or minority communities.

Dropout rates: 13,500 students from SC, ST, OBC and minority communities dropped out of Central Universities, IITs and IIMs in the last five years.

Teachers from Aspirational Sections: 11.9% of teachers are from the SC and ST community combined, which is a miniscule percentage of the whole.

While we have indeed seen a rise in the enrollment ratios, it does not present the whole picture. The number of students enrolled in higher education institutions varies across states.

Students from SC, ST, OBC communities face structural and systemic hardships, exemplified by the drop-out and suicide cases. In reply to a question in the Rajya Sabha where the Union government

presented details of the cases of suicides categorised according to community, it was found in the past 5 years, 17 out of 31 cases of suicide in IITs were either from SCs, STs, OBCs, or minorities.⁶

Coupled with the fact that over 13,500 students from these communities have dropped out of central universities, IITs, or IIMs over 5 years, it is a matter of utmost significance. It is reasonable to assume that the identities of caste played a role in this. The policy decision of affirmative action which aims at ensuring inclusivity on campuses is used as a reason to discriminate against students from aspirational sections. Those securing admissions based on their ranks in the respective category are treated with derision and dismay for their lack of ‘merit’.

II. Discrimination faced by Students from Aspirational Sections

In a survey conducted by the IIT-Bombay SC/ST cell in 2022 of 388 students, results revealed that 37.1% of the students had been asked their JEE rank, presumably to understand their caste identity.⁷ Students also chose to hide their caste to avoid the taboo of reservation. While the survey involved a small sample size, it does throw light on the nuanced ways in which caste identity is used to put down or limit access to higher education.

In *Neil Aurelio Nunes (2022)*⁸, the Supreme Court observed that “*merit cannot be reduced to narrow definitions of performance in an open competitive examination.*” This is important to understand the notion of merit and how it has influenced the access to education for communities lacking the conventional social privilege.



The Thorat Committee in its 2007 report pointed out the problems faced by SC/ST students in AIIMS, Delhi. It noted that two-thirds of SC/ST students reported not receiving as much support from teachers as other students did and they perceived it to be a result of their caste identity. The committee also recommended the start of a remedial course in English language, a need that had been expressed by students from aspirational sections.

This is a telling observation - the lack of access to English, the *lingua franca* in today's world, also inhibits SC/ST students from accessing institutions of higher learning. Ramavath and Krishnaiah in their paper also point out the same conundrum.⁹ As the primary education is done in the local language, the English medium used in universities puts it out of reach for aspirational sections.

III. Aspirational Sections Bear the Brunt of Inter-Sectional Burdens

The mushrooming of private universities as well as the societal shift after privatization and liberalization could also be seen as a factor. First, the growth of private capital in education has intentionally or unintentionally excluded low-income groups.¹⁰ Given class and caste often overlap in the society, it also reduces the chances for aspirational sections to gain higher education.

In a presentation dissecting the findings of the Multidimensional Poverty Index¹¹, the UNECE observed that 5 out of 6 poor people “*are from lower tribes or castes.*” More than half of the ST community and approximately 33.3% of the SC community fall below the poverty line in the MPI which is a matter of concern.

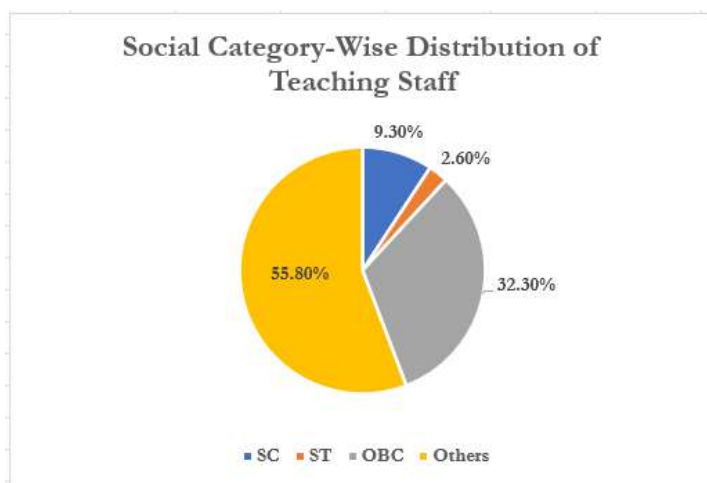


It should be noted that the MPI also accounts for school attendance and mean years of schooling as its indicators. Thus, the prevalence of poverty could be considered a major factor in why these sections fail to access or take advantage of higher education.

Secondly, the private sector does not have a legal mandate to implement affirmative action policies in the admission process, that is, reservations cease to be a tool for accessibility. The narrow boundaries of merit come into play where the performance in terms of marks in an examination becomes the litmus test for entry. This process does not take into account the fact that the pattern of tests designed to check for suitability of candidates is prone to bias of privilege.

IV. Representation of Aspirational Sections among Teachers

The representation of teachers from diverse social communities could also be an important metric to see if those able to access higher learning are able to put it into practice. As per the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), 2021-22, the total number of teachers number 15.97 lakh in all. Out of the same, the category-wise distribution represents a not-so-happy picture.¹² 9.3% of teachers are from the SC community, 2.6% are from the ST community amounting to a total of 11.9% which is a miniscule percentage of the whole. 32.3% are from the OBCs, leaving 55.8% of teachers from other categories. This is a skewed distribution in the representation of aspirational sections.



[Graph 1] Source: All India Survey of Higher Education, 2021-22

As a result, even those with the wherewithal to gain college degrees are not able to see it translate into action. Further, colleges often avoid recruiting faculties from aspirational sections citing the lack of

eligible candidates. This ingrained and perpetuating culture of casteism furthers the alienation faced by SCs, and STs. It should also be noted that IITs follow a flexi-cadre policy - a system where the total number of positions are not fixed which can lead to a twisting of the rules to avoid implementing reservation provisions.

A similar observation was made by the Committee for the Welfare of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in its report submitted to the last Lok Sabha.¹³ It notes that it is “*not inclined to accept the frequently stereo-type reply of the government that no sufficient number of suitable candidates could be found.*” The Committee also pointed out that these candidates, though equally bright and deserving, are declared ‘not suitable’ because of biased assessment by the concerned Selection Committee.

There is progress being made, no doubt. As per reply to a question in the Rajya Sabha in February, 2024, the Union government stated that since September 2022, 6420 faculty posts have been filled through special recruitment drives out of which there were 920 SC candidates, 457 ST candidates, 1502 OBC candidates.¹⁴ This reflects the efforts being made to ensure equitable representation in the field of higher education.

The forthcoming section shall deal with the various schemes and policies available to promote and enable access of aspirational sections to higher education. Following that, best practices across India and the globe shall be reviewed to see the implementability across the board in India.

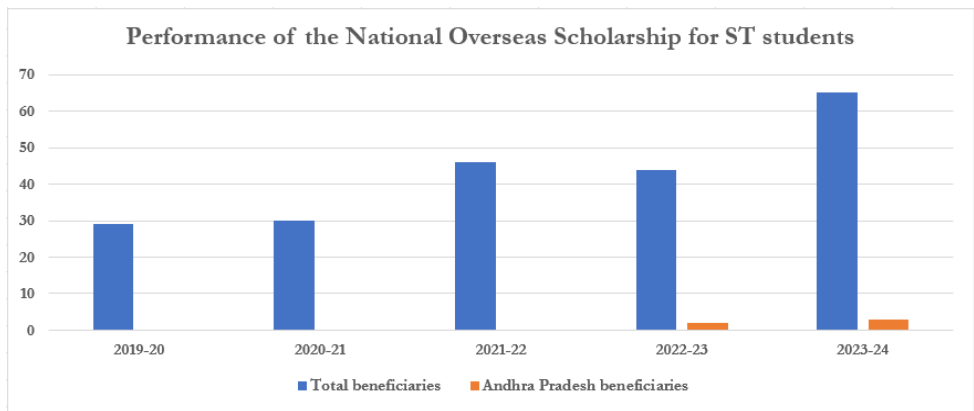
V. Assessment of Government Policies Regarding Aspirational Sections’ Access to Higher Education

Over the years, the government has taken various steps to support the aspirational sections’ access to education. Various schemes are in place that provide scholarships and other opportunities to students belonging to aspirational sections. It is important therefore, to undertake an assessment of the performance of these schemes to understand their efficacy.

a. National Overseas Scholarship for Scheduled Tribe students

It is a Central Sector Scheme under the aegis of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs. Each year, students from the ST community are selected for the scholarship to pursue their Master’s degree, Ph.D. or Post Doctoral courses abroad.¹⁵ It provides an opportunity for students from ST community to gain access to foreign expertise and methodologies of teaching, thereby aiding them to broaden their horizons.

The state-wise distribution of beneficiaries is however skewed. For instance, Andhra Pradesh despite having almost 2.5% of the country’s tribal population¹⁶, did not have any beneficiaries of the scheme from 2019 to 2022. Since then, there has been a minor improvement with two beneficiaries in 2022-23 and three beneficiaries in 2023-24.

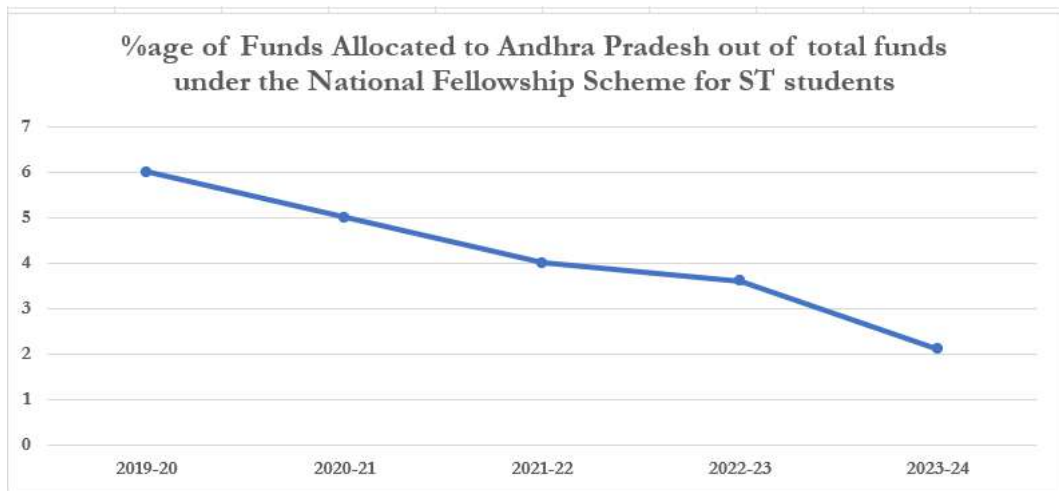


[Graph 2] Source: Scheme Dashboard, Ministry of Tribal Affairs

This disparity however, points to the need for popularisation of the scheme at the national level. This would ensure that representation happens in the true essence of the term and students across various ST communities benefit from the opportunity.

b. National Fellowship Scheme for Scheduled Tribe students

It is a Central Sector scheme of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs wherein 750 fresh ST students are given fellowship for pursuing M.Phil and Ph.D. degrees. It provides an opportunity for students from aspirational sections to pursue higher studies within India.

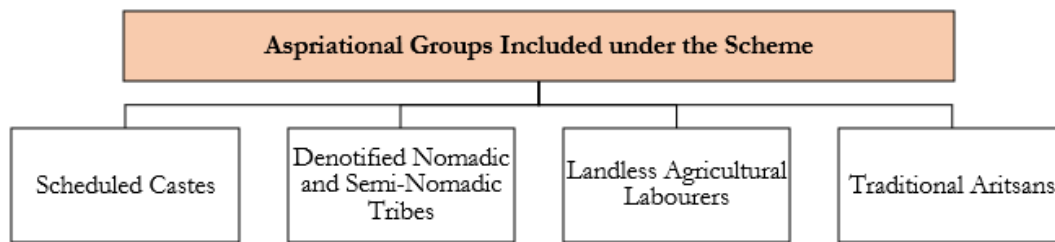


[Graph 3] Source: Scheme Dashboard, Ministry of Tribal Affairs

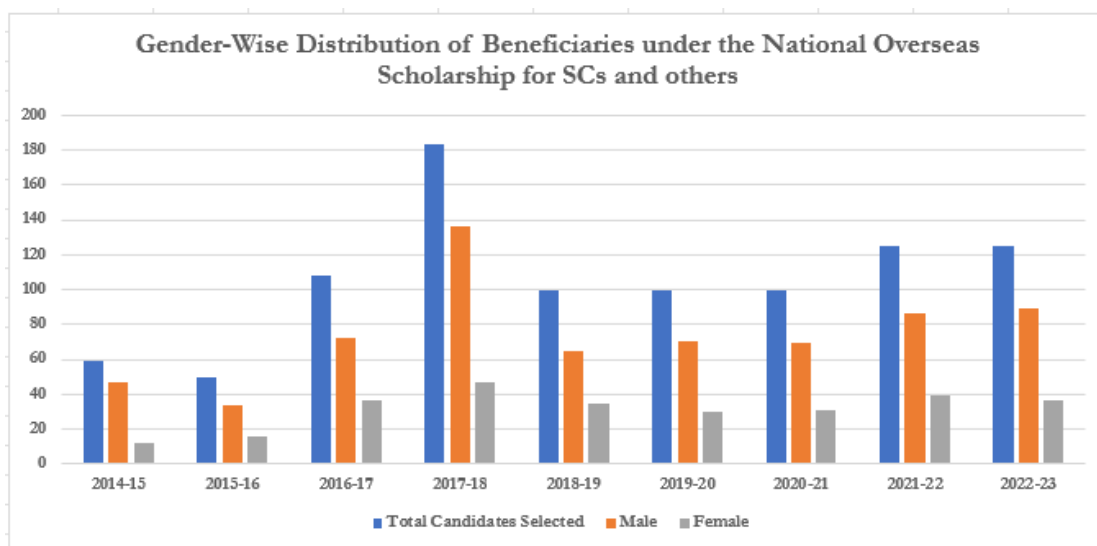
The state of Andhra Pradesh however, has seen a declining fund allocation for the scheme in the past five years.¹⁷ This does not present a promising trend as it indicates disparity in access across states. There is a need to ensure that students from all states get a fair opportunity to avail higher education opportunities

c. National Overseas Scholarship for Scheduled Caste students

It is a scheme that aims to empower low-income students from aspirational sections.¹⁸ The scholarship supports their pursuit of higher education such as a Master’s degree or Ph.D. courses. The scheme covers expenses on total tuition fee, maintenance and contingency allowance, visa fee, to and fro air passage etc. The opportunity to study abroad ultimately contributes to their economic and social upliftment.



According to the scheme guidelines, 30% of the awards every year are earmarked for women candidates ensuring that there is representation across genders. However, this 30% criterion has not always been met.



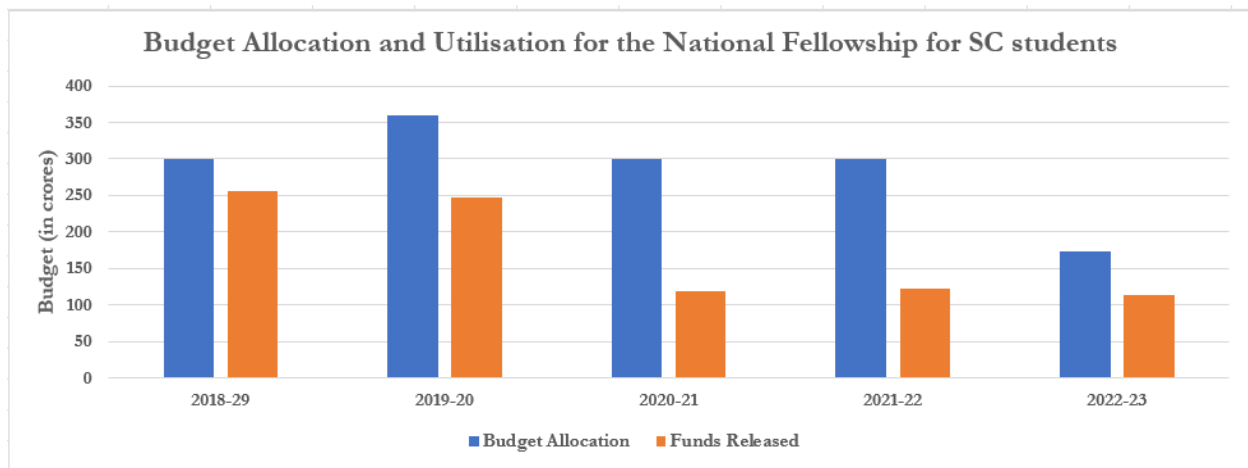
[Graph 4] Source: Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No. 268 (19 July 2022)

Further, in reply to an Unstarred Question in the Lok Sabha, it was mentioned that gender-wise data of applicants is not maintained for the present scheme whereas the same is available for the National Overseas Scholarship Scheme for Disabled Students.¹⁹ A gender-wise analysis of applicants is important to understand the efficacy of the reservation provided under the scheme.

Since the revision of guidelines in 2021, maintenance of data on distribution of scholarships according to field of study has also been done away with.²⁰ This also diminishes the ability to undertake a multi-faceted analysis of the utilisation of scholarships thereby affecting implementation assessment.

d. National Fellowship for Scheduled Caste Students

It is a central sector scheme introduced in 2005 to provide opportunities to Scheduled Castes students for pursuing higher education leading to M.Phil or Ph.D degrees in Sciences, Humanities and Social Science streams. The National Scheduled Castes Finance and Development Corporation has been assigned as the central nodal agency for implementation of the scheme.



[Graph 5] Source: About the Scheme, Department of Social Justice and Empowerment

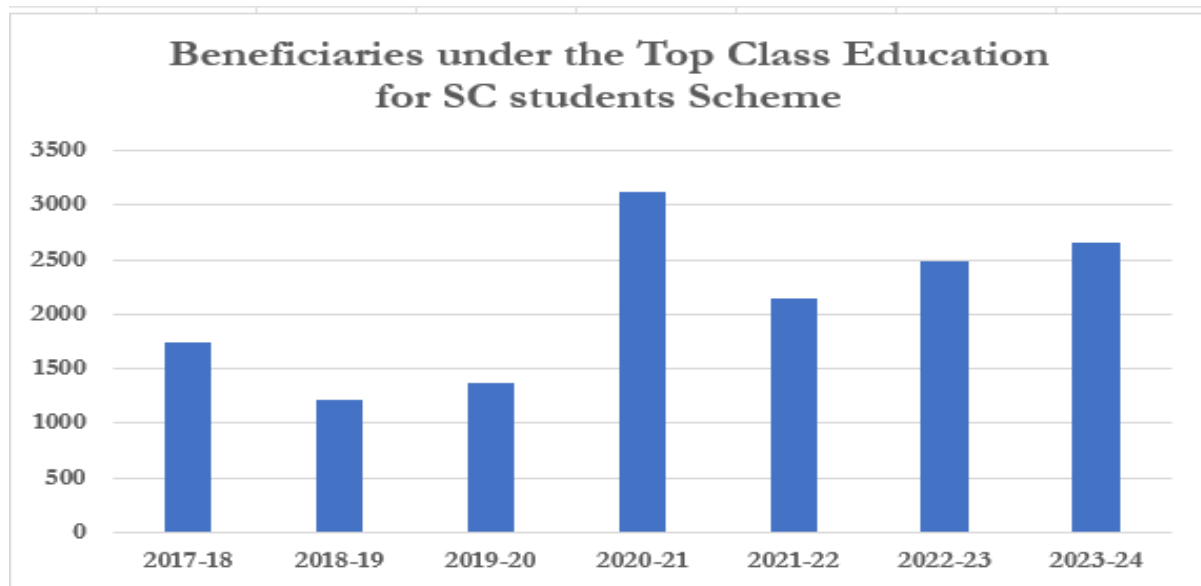
The data on budget allocation and utilisation for the scheme shows a worrying trend. Since 2018-19, the funds released have been consistently lower than the funds allocated for the scheme. This has finally resulted in the allocation itself being slashed from Rs. 300 crores in 2021-22 to Rs. 173 crores in 2022-23 and this has been further reduced to Rs. 163 crores under the 2023-24 Budget.²¹

Thus, due to constant underutilisation of funds, the budget for the scheme has come down by almost 50%. It is incumbent on the government to assess where the fault lies. A thorough study of the

methodology adopted for predicting the expenditure on the scheme and consequent shortfall needs to be undertaken.

e. Top Class Education for SC students

It is a central sector scheme that aims at recognising and promoting education amongst students belonging to the SC community, by providing financial support. The scheme aims to cover SC students pursuing their studies beyond 12th class.²²



[Graph 6] Source: Scheme Dashboard, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment; Rajya Sabha Unstarred Question No. 1250 (8 December 2021); Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No. 3372 (9 December 2019)

The data on beneficiaries under the scheme between 2017-18 and 2023-24 showcases a lack on uniformity in the number of students selected for the scholarship. An assessment should be made to understand the reasons for the drop from 3118 beneficiaries in 2020-21 to 2147 in 2021-22.²³ It should be endeavored that a minimum number of scholarships is set to be awarded each year, to maintain predictability of the scheme for applicants.

The scheme dashboard indicates that students from 239 institutes have been availing the benefits of this scheme since 2020-21.²⁴ Efforts should be made to increase the number of institutes to make the scheme more broad-based.

f. Free Coaching Scheme for SC and OBC Students

The scheme is aimed at providing coaching of good quality for economically disadvantaged SC and OBC students to enable them to appear in competitive examinations for obtaining appropriate jobs or for securing admission in reputed technical and professional higher educational institutions.²⁵

Year	Expenditure (in Rs. crore)
2017-18	19.84
2018-19	14.87
2019-20	13.26
2020-21	11.96
2021-22	14.98

[Table 1] Source: Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No. 2166 (14 March 2023)

As per a reply to an Unstarred Question in the Lok Sabha, the expenditure on the scheme has been witnessing decreasing expenditure.²⁶ From 2023-24, the scheme is being implemented by the Dr. Ambedkar Foundation which signs Memoranda of Understanding with interested Central Universities. Currently, nineteen universities are implementing the scheme.²⁷

HIGHLIGHT BOX 3: ASSESSMENT OF GOVERNMENT POLICIES

National Overseas Scholarship for ST students: No beneficiaries from Andhra Pradesh between 2019 and 2022.

National Fellowship Scheme for ST students: Andhra Pradesh has seen a declining fund allocation in the last five years.

National Overseas Scholarship for SC students: 30% reservation for women not followed consistently.

National Fellowship for SC students: Budget for the scheme has declined from Rs. 300 crores in 2021-22 to Rs. 163 crores in 2023-24.

Despite the assignment of responsibility for implementation, the government should take a proactive role in ensuring that Central Universities across states participate in the scheme to ensure equitable access to resources for students of aspirational sections.

VI. Best Practices for Consideration

Experiments, policies, and schemes have been tried out in India and abroad to ensure equitable access to education. The idea behind it is to guarantee a trust-based, participatory process for aspirational sections. We shall look at both domestic and international practices and review the same.

a. Scholarship by Tamil Nadu Department of Adi Dravidar and Tribal Welfare

The government of Tamil Nadu has initiated a scheme to provide scholarships to Adi Dravidar, Scheduled Tribes, and Christian Adi Dravidar students for pursuing postgraduate and doctoral research schemes abroad. As per the website, *“to avail scholarship under this scheme, the annual income limit of the parent/guardian should not exceed 8.00 lakh. 10 students are selected and given scholarship up to 36.00 lakh rupees per annum depending on the country and course of study.”*²⁸

This is an empowering step that provides a substantial amount of monetary support through which students can have a chance at a better future, with cascading impacts. Moreover, they are also given coaching through the Tamil Nadu Adidraavidar Housing and Development Corporation Ltd. for clearing qualifying examinations such as IELTS, TOEFL which is a measure that could be imitated by other state governments.



While various governments have started free coaching for competitive examinations like the ‘Abhyudaya Yojana’ of Uttar Pradesh, dedicated programs to coach aspirational sections for higher education are not as many. The recommendation would be to explore programs in states and if possible, even at the Union level.

b. Reservations in the Private Sector

Affirmative action has proven to be a potent tool in at least increasing the percentage of disadvantaged sections in education. In so far communities in the US which have been discriminated against are concerned, such policies have uplifted them.²⁹ The rate of black Americans going to college increased only after the introduction of affirmative action in the 1960s and the 1970s.

Recently, South Africa came up with its own employment equity law in 2023, setting certain racial equity targets in hiring by businesses. This is a forward-looking move where representation is seen as quintessential and an inherent part of inclusive growth.

However, at the same time, the judgement of the US Supreme Court in *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, ruling that consideration of race in student admission was violative of the ‘Equal Protection’ clause of the 14th amendment. India needs to take the best of both worlds, by upholding quality in education and employment, while keeping inclusivity and equity at the forefront of the journey.

Media reports suggest that the government may consider implementing its reservation policy in the internship scheme for youth, announced in the Union Budget.³⁰ If seen through, it could be the first step in heralding true accessibility for aspirational sections.

c. Higher Education Participation & Partnerships Program (Australia)

The program provides funding to certain listed universities to undertake action so as to increase access to undergraduate courses for people coming from “*regional and remote Australia, low socio-economic status backgrounds, and Indigenous persons.*” As per the website, it helps enhance completion and retention rates of these students. This could be a best practice to emulate across the country, especially in those universities where the representation of SC, ST, OBC students is not up to the mark.

HIGHLIGHT BOX 4: BEST PRACTICES

Coaching for students from aspirational sections: Tamil Nadu provides scholarships and coaching to ST and Adi Dravidar students.

Reservations in the Private Sector: South Africa and the USA seen positive results from the introduction of affirmative action.

Facilitating Access to Institutions: Australia provides funding to certain universities to enable them to increase access to undergraduate courses for indigenous persons, people from low-income backgrounds etc.

It may also be considered for incentivizing universities such as IITs and IIMs where faculties from aspirational sections are low in numbers, as has been elucidated. Through use of grants and tweaking the skeletal structure of the scheme, it could be adapted to the Indian scenario.

d. National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Strategy

The strategy aims at empowering students from these communities to learn in an environment where educators who are adept with the cultural context deliver lessons. It also intends to teach all Australian children and young people about the history, and culture of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This is a mature strategy to build trust and cohesion among various communities to enhance an understanding of the disadvantages and disabilities that marginalized communities face.

If implemented in India, it could be a pathway to bridge misunderstandings among various communities. Further, with a better understanding of the historical marginalization of aspirational sections, consensus could be built for not only strengthening affirmative action but also extending it to the private sector.

The best practices for enhancing access of the aspirational sections to education has been a varied and diverse set of strategies. It is situated in the local context, and has been tailored to fit those circumstances. If found suitable for implementation, it should have inputs from local communities, stakeholders from among students, and experts to tweak it. The Parliament would be the perfect forum to hold these discussions and debate on the best strategy forward.

VII. Conclusion

The vision of the Indian Constitution has been to ensure a democratic republic where various sections of the population are the recipients of inclusive growth. Even though we have managed to increase the access of aspirational communities to education, a lot remains to be done.

A glance through the analysis of the government schemes meant for promoting education among SCs, STs, etc. would lay bare the glaring inconsistencies in the formulation and implementation of the schemes. Any successful policy requires transparency in **setting of targets**, defining **key performance indicators** (KPIs), and **evaluating the impact** based on the actual outcomes. Data-driven and evidence-based policy sets the stage for universal and inclusive development.

The high standards have not been reached. In the National Fellowship Scheme for SC Students, the budget allocation was slashed from Rs. 300 crores in 2021-22 to Rs. 173 crores in 2022-23. This was accompanied by a consistent underutilisation of funds for which no credible explanation has been presented. Ideally, in a scheme that aims to encourage SC students to pursue education, **strict targets should have been set in terms of beneficiaries, budget allocation, and impact assessment** of the scheme carried out on the failure to achieve the same.

Likewise, in the central sector scheme 'Top Class Scheme for SC Students', the number of beneficiaries dropped by almost a thousand students between 2020-21 and 2021-22. In such a case, it is incumbent on the government to **set clear methodologies for selection of beneficiaries** and assess if there is a discrepancy. With no outcome-based evaluation, the policies seem to be on an auto-pilot mode where budget increase or decrease is independent of the contextual setting of the scheme. In the National Overseas Scheme for SC students, while 30% of beneficiaries are to be women as per the scheme guidelines, data on gender of applicants is not maintained.

This prevents the quantitative and qualitative interpretation of the proportion of women selected out of the same gender of applicants, their economic background, and the like. An effective policy, to reiterate again, should have well-defined targets, KPIs, methodologies for selection, and a robust assessment to gauge the usefulness. We hope that this primer acts as a nudge for the government to undertake required changes across its policies so that not only legislators but also the civil society and citizenry at large are informed about the effectiveness of various measures of the government. The result would be enhanced accountability which is the cornerstone of good governance.

VIII. References

- ¹ “Ancient Universities in India” available at: <https://www.aicte-india.org/downloads/ancient.pdf>.
- ² “Maha’s Bhidewada, where India’s First Girls’ School Came up in 1848, to be National Memorial” The Statesman, available at: https://www.thestatesman.com/india/mahas-bhidewada-where-indias-first-girls-school-came-up-in-1848-to-be-national-memorial-1503158136.html#google_vignette.
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IX. Acknowledgements

After spending over three decades in public service, I have embarked on a new journey as a Parliamentarian wherein I intend to drive the discussions on public policy in a positive direction through debates, discussions, and reports on issues of national importance. This primer on the aspirational sections' access to higher education, is a step in that direction.

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I hope that this primer furthers the important work being done for the upliftment, empowerment and education of the aspirational sections in India so that our country becomes a shining beacon for the rest of the world.

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KPF's Ambedkar School of Advocacy on Public Policy (ASAP) is a policy research and strategy organization founded by Mr. Krishna Prasad Tenneti, MP, Bapatla, Andhra Pradesh. It works to provide cutting-edge research support to policy-makers and legislators on various issues of public importance in the Parliament and beyond. Our vision is to ensure equitable and inclusive growth for all.

