

# EDUCATION – DO WE START AT THE SAME POINT?

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## Abstract

Education has become an indispensable need of modern society and everyone tries to outdo the other in qualifying themselves. We are in an international stadium competing with each other. It is true that only a common finishing point would determine the victor of the race. At the same time, it is unfair that we do not have the same starting point. Disparity exists: the rich and the poor, the rural and the urban, and so on. Each one starts differently. The educational opportunities available for the students of varied background are not equal. As a result, most of the rural students find themselves with undeserved inability. This article considers the admission procedure of the professional colleges in India in the light of the recent National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) issue as a case study. This article aims to critically find ways to address this issue of providing equal opportunity in educating Indian youth.

NEET provides a method of assessment for all, ‘a common finishing point’ without ensuring the equal distribution of opportunities to achieve it. A lot of ground work needs to be done before bringing in the eligibility test. Every student, including the ones in the village schools must be prepared to face it. The standard of education should be so high in order to link their local aspirations to global expectations. The government incapable of fulfilling the responsibility of providing standard education to its citizens, has passed it on to the hands of certain willing ‘big whales’. And now, education has become a costly affair and the survival of the fittest has become the norm. This scenario we have created is unconstitutional and anti-democratic. Instead the right option would be the capability approach, where the motive is to increase the capability of everyone by providing equal opportunities for all.

To enable everyone to become capable of achieving his/her dream is the ultimate aim of the capability approach. The competitive exam syllabus must be made accessible to all and any hindrance to avail of it must be removed. We need to improve the rural schools to the standard of the CBSE schools in the cities. The rich and the poor have to be educated in a standardized manner without any disparity. The standardization has to be done from the grassroots level. Without this any change or alteration in the system will only create disparity and will not achieve its purpose. Hence, we do not emphasize only reservations, neither do we stand for the concept of ‘One Size Fits All’. All we need is the capability approach which enables each citizen to grow and get placed according to his/her own merit. Ensuring equal opportunities for the rural students and making all educational facilities accessible to them would bring real transformation in our society.

**Keywords:** Indian Youth, Education, Equal Opportunity, Capability Approach, NEET

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# **EDUCATION – DO WE START AT THE SAME POINT?**

## **1. Introduction**

Education has become an indispensable need of modern society and everyone tries to outdo the other in qualifying themselves. We are in an international stadium competing with each other. It is true that only a common finishing point would determine the victor of the race. At the same time, it is unfair that we do not have the same starting point. Disparity exists: the rich and the poor, the rural and the urban, and so on. Each one starts differently. The educational opportunities available for the students of varied background are not equal. As a result most of the rural students have undeserved inability. This article studies the admission procedure of the professional colleges in India in the light of the recent National Eligibility Entrance Test (NEET) issue. The research method followed involved in this study is the case study of Anitha and few medical students who were able to make it through NEET. The ethical and legal side of the common entrance exam is analysed with references. This article would surely bring to light the thousands of voices that rose at the suicide of the poor medical aspirant, Anitha and this work is dedicated to her and all our young people who have lost their life and dream due to the unjust admission procedures.

## **2. Education in India**

Education has long been considered as a universal catalyst for poverty reduction, health improvements and overall social-economic development (Worthman, 2011: 435). Realising the value of education as a powerful tool for social change and progress (Kaushal, 2012: 43), and under pressure from national and international forces, the Indian government introduced the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009 (Government of India, 2009). This intervention provides free and compulsory schooling to children in the 6-14-year age bracket. By this Act, India joined a list of 135 nations that had made education a right (The Hindu, 2010).

### **3. The Rich and The Poor – Disparity**

The free and compulsory education scheme has achieved good results all over the nation. Efforts have been made to educate the poor children. Still the disparity between the rich and the poor exists. Right to education for all necessarily means a standard education with equal opportunities, but the rural children do not get a quality education. Parents of poor economic background, due to lack of money, are unable to send their children to private schools and hence depend upon government schools for education. But many of the government schools in rural areas lack a proper teacher- student ratio, infrastructure, basic amenities, and learning materials and so on. In addition to this, they do not have access to any tuition centres or language classes to clear competitive exams. The rural students get none of the support systems which are readily available for city students. Many of the students go for some menial jobs after their school hours in order to manage their study expenses on their own. The harsh conditions of life and pitiable situation in their homes do not provide an ambient to study and add to the challenge. Hence there is a difference between the city and village student not in terms of brain or development but their initial environment, skills, learning ability, availability of infrastructure, and access to different facilities. All of these must be considered and efforts must be taken to encourage the genuine rural students who are interested in education and make them competent. If the quality and the opportunities are improved, then aspiring rural children and India can fulfil their dreams of doing something great.

### **4. Unjust Admission Procedure**

Every year thousands of students aspire to join the professional colleges but the seats are very limited. It has become a rat race for the students and many criteria including money, power, position and influence play a significant role along with their intellectual capacity. Admission to most of the professional courses (BE, B.Tech., MBBS etc.) is based on competitive examinations/merit or one's capacity to afford the cost of education. The merit seats were filled either by NEET or counselling for State Board students (until last year). In addition to this, every college has its own criteria for filling up the management seats allotted to them. In this manner

many colleges were holding different entrance exams to choose the students and were collecting huge capitation fees. Due to this practice, wealthy people entered medical colleges with poor grades and there was a complaint that the socially backward students were allotted seats in the name of reservations. Hence the admission procedure has been in a mess.

#### **4.1 NEET – A Common Finishing Point**

To facilitate fair competition, and to provide a ‘measure of merit’ for the students, a common finishing point is necessary. That’s where the NEET was posed as a solution. The students who have been preparing themselves for different examinations and the parents who were saving bulk donations for their wards, found a saviour in NEET. Everyone thought that it would be a common qualifier and put an end to all malpractices. Naslun Khan, MBBS, GMERS Medical College, Gandhinagar contends that, “I think the Supreme Court’s move is really good as students will now have to study for only one competitive exam. So, the syllabus remains the same and we can concentrate on cracking only one exam without rushing. The malpractices prevalent in the name of exams will also be reduced and every student will get a fair chance.”

And so, the important reasons the Central Government and various other agencies are hell-bent on imposing NEET is to:

1. To bring in uniformity in the admission process as there are several entrance exams which lack credibility and are being conducted by different universities.
2. Improve the standard of medical education,
3. To ensure that the capitation fee system be avoided.

Will NEET address all these issues? In the following paragraphs let us see how it fails to achieve its purpose.

#### **4.2 A Comparison of Admission Procedures until Now and Hereafter**

Admissions to Medical colleges in Tamil Nadu until last year were made following these procedures:

1) First, the merit list of the 15 percent All India quota (AIPMT) will be released and the counselling begins for them. These are the students who have passed NEET. Mostly they are from other states because the state board students from Tamil Nadu who make up the 80% of the state's student population do not take up NEET as it is based on the CBSE Syllabus.

2) Then, the state computes the cut-off based on the twelfth standard board exam marks and posts a medical rank list. Mostly the native students come under this category and this would fill the rest of the seats in the state. This category of admissions has reservations for socially backward students.

**Hereafter**, the 12<sup>th</sup> marks would no longer be considered as all the seats (100%) go to the NEET passed students. Based on the NEET scores, the state merit list will be sent by the CBSE to the Directorate of Medical Education. Depending on their performance, the students who make it on the merit list will be asked to appear for two rounds of counselling. For this counselling, students have to register online and have to submit all their details, NEET scores and also choose which college they would prefer going to. Depending on this the students will be shortlisted and called for counselling. Since NEET applies to both government and private medical colleges, the counselling takes place at once. CBSE has agreed that the 80 percent of Medical seats in Tamil Nadu would be filled by NEET passed Tamil students.

Now the question is: the CBSE was unable to fill the 15% of seats using the NEET passed Tamil students in the older system, then, how far is it possible to fill the 80% of the seats with the students of the state as per the new norm? Again, a lesser percent of native students would pass NEET and the major portion of Tamil Nadu Medical College seats would go to the students of other states. The best example is the last medical admission procedure, when 2,503 MBBS seats were available in the state and just 5 government school students were able to get placed.

### **4.3 Analysing the Starting Point**

Tamil Nadu has over 1.2 crore students in four streams of school education — 45,000 State Board schools, 11,000 Matriculation schools, 25 Oriental schools, 50 Anglo-Indian

schools, and only around 580 schools affiliated to the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) all with separate syllabus, textbooks and schemes of examinations. Several leading educationists have questioned NEET on the premise - how will a uniform entrance test be justified when there are no uniform boards of education or syllabi? There is no empirical data or study done to compare the different boards of education and their syllabus in India and come to the conclusion that CBSE (Central Board of Secondary Education) is the best or better than State Boards. The question then is why the Medical Council of India (MCI) chose the CBSE syllabus as the base for the entrance exam to bring in uniformity, when only a miniscule number of student's study in CBSE when compared to other boards.

NEET provides a method of assessment for all -a common finishing point- without ensuring the equal distribution of opportunities to achieve it. A lot of ground work needs to be done before bringing in the eligibility test. Every student, including the ones in the village schools must be prepared to face it. Ketaki Shivhar Lamture, Shri Bankatala Lahoti English School, Latur says that, "Cancelling all the exams and having NEET is a bad idea. The Supreme Court's decision is highly unfair as NEET is based on the CBSE and NCERT syllabus. It is hard for State board students to catch up with a completely new syllabus in just two months. I am finding it very difficult to cope with the syllabus as I have very little time and a lot to study. Because of this verdict, many State board students might not be able to achieve their dream of becoming a doctor." This anxiety is felt by many. One among them was Anitha from Arialur. She was poor and from an obscure hamlet lacking all educational and environmental facilities to compete on the CBSE forum. She had ambitions for enrolling in a medical school and would have made it into one, had the old system continued. The sudden change of the admission procedure agitated her and she went up to the Supreme Court to fight it out. But, her efforts were in vain and all her dreams destroyed in the land mark verdict of the Supreme Court in favour of NEET on August 23 2017. Anitha went through excruciating agony and committed suicide on Sep 1<sup>st</sup>. The Suicide of Anitha due to her undeserved inability to clear NEET, moved everyone to tears. With the pro NEET judgment, the ambitions of thousand would be doctors were shattered. and Anitha symbolises them.

The instinct of the central government in implementing NEET, which is merely one of its many tools in implementing a 'one nation, one policy' standard, is understandable. But the

problem for Tamil Nadu is that this comes at the cost of 75% of its rural medical aspirants. And if the country continues with this situation, there would be no doctors coming from the villages



of Tamil Nadu for the next 10 years. In states like Kerala, the state board syllabus is formulated in accordance with the Central Board and the students are able to crack NEET without much effort.

Moreover, NEET has not solved the issue of high capitation fees. It has made medical education unaffordable to students who even clear NEET. Private medical colleges have hiked their fee to astounding proportions, so that the capitation fee is collected as fees annually. Needless to say, there would be myriad other fees collected from students. “In colleges like Sri Ramachandra University, Chennai, where I wanted to study, the fees were 9 Lakhs for merit students and 40 Lakhs for the management quota. Now it is 21 Lakhs for all as the management quota is abolished” says, Kumaraguru, a medical student who joined Jawaharlal Nehru Medical College, Bangalore, after clearing NEET with 420 marks in Karnataka.

Furthermore, NEET is not necessary to improve the standard of medical education. The proof of how well the system works is in the outcome it generates. If the purpose of medical education is producing doctors who provide healthcare for society, then by all accounts, Tamil Nadu has a good system. After all, the state has India’s best healthcare system that’s been held up as a model for other developing countries by the Lancet report. For years our state board schools have produced capable and dedicated doctors. NEET is not forced upon us in the interest of improving the standard of medical education but, it controls who should enter the medical

field. No doubt, it is the creamy layer of society, who can afford for their children a Central Board Education. For NEET to be justified, the government has to make the CBSE affordable and accessible even to the poorest of the poor as the State Board is now. NEET will not and cannot solve any of the issues it purported to resolve.

#### **4.4 Unconstitutional**

The National Eligibility Entrance Test (NEET) is a direct assault on the concept of social justice enshrined in the Constitution of India. In the pretext of bringing in uniformity, NEET destroys the golden concept of our Constitution of not treating unequals equally. NEET does exactly this.

NEET should also go because it creates an urban-rural divide and a division based on the boards in which they study, as claimed by Garga Chatterjee, an eminent scholar. In India, we take pride in diversity and plurality. Homogenisation masked as uniform standards will only wreak havoc on our social fabric, which is already under considerable strain.

The Supreme Court Bench of Chief Justice Altamas Kabir and Justices Anil R. Dave and Vikramajit Sen on Apr 11, 2016 said, “Apart from the legal aspects, there can be no controversy that the standard of education all over the country is not the same. Each State has its own system and pattern of education, including the medium of instruction. It cannot also be disputed that children in the metropolitan areas enjoy greater privileges than their counterparts in most of the rural areas as far as education is concerned, and the decision of the Central government to support a single entrance examination would perpetuate such a divide in the name of merit.

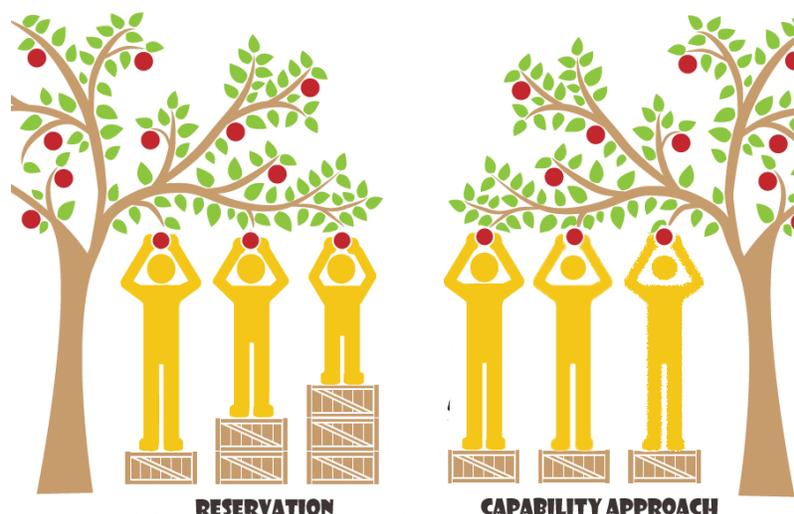
In addition to this, according to the article 245(2) of the Constitution of India: when any state law receives the assent of the President in an occupied field, only Parliament has the power to enact a law which can repeal or nullify the state law. In the present situation, Parliament has not enacted any law-making NEET compulsory, only the MCI (Medical Council of India) has made NEET compulsory. In such a situation, only the State Law i.e. the Tamil Nadu Regulation of Admission in Professional Courses Act, 2006, will prevail, which abolishes any form of

entrance test. The Supreme Court committed a glaring error in not appreciating this Constitutional issue and granting an exemption to the State of Tamil Nadu from NEET

## 5. Reservation versus Capability Approach

None can deny that the students in the economic and social margins of society are far behind when it comes to educational opportunities and facilities. To level play between unequals two approaches are possible. The first is equity which suggests reservation as an extra help to the poor students. Here the socially backward classes may be able to join the colleges or get a government job like others even if their grades are lower. They may seem to have got equal rights, still they remain intellectually dull when compared to their companions who entered the college or job through merit. It doesn't help them to grow in a true sense.

The second is the capability approach put forward by Amartya Sen. "The Capability Approach is defined by its choice of focus upon the moral significance of individuals' capability of achieving the kind of lives they have reason to value." To make everyone capable of achieving his/her dream is the ultimate motive of this approach. The practical implications of this approach are as follows: here we need to provide not mere reservations but extra and necessary training at affordable cost to all the poor, deserving and marginalized students. The competitive exam syllabus must be made accessible to all and any hindrance to avail of it must be removed. We need to raise the rural schools to the standard of the CBSE schools in the cities. The rich and the poor have to be educated in a standardized manner without any disparity. Their social and economic conditions have to be improved and a better study ambient must be created. When everyone is at the right starting point we shall begin the race. Until then any admission procedure based on the Common Entrance Exam would be unfair.



**A note on Don Bosco's Educative System:** The capability approach suggests inclusiveness which is also the characteristic element of the Educative system of Don Bosco. Don Bosco's option for the poor and underprivileged prevailed over his other educative criteria. Moreover only if an educative system takes into consideration everyone's need and overall capability it would be a fitting common system. So, the knowledge of the need is an aid for addressing it. This is what Don Bosco meant when he said "In every young person a point of goodness is accessible and it is the primary duty of the educator to discover that sensitive cord of the heart so as to draw out the best in the young person. Cold and insensitive procedures opposed to this would only feign growth and create havoc and social imbalance in society. Lot of lives and dreams would be devastated and would result in irreparable loss.

## **6. Conclusion**

As I conclude the article here, I would like to highlight some of the salient points that have been discussed so far and give them in a gist form. Education has long been considered as a universal catalyst for poverty reduction, health improvements and overall social-economic development. Right to education for all necessarily means a standard education with equal opportunities, but the rural children do not get a quality education. There is a difference between city and village students not in terms of brain or development but their initial environment, skills, learning ability, availability of infrastructure, and access to different facilities. If the quality and the opportunities are improved, then aspiring rural children and India can fulfil their dreams of doing something great.

The National Eligibility Entrance Test (NEET), the common medical entrance exam based on the CBSE syllabus, was made mandatory in Tamil Nadu in 2017. This was first posed as a way to bring equality and standardization in the Medical field. The results achieved however, do not prove it. In the last medical admission exam 3, 534 MBBS seats were available in the state and just 5 government school students were able to get placed. The main reason is that these students were not given adequate training to compete in such an exam. This is a direct assault on the concept of social justice enshrined in the Constitution of India. On the pretext of

bringing uniformity, NEET destroys the golden concept of our Constitution of not treating unequal's equally.

To enable everyone capable of achieving his/her dream is the ultimate aim of the capability approach. The competitive exam syllabus must be made accessible to all and any hindrance to avail of it must be removed. We need to raise the rural schools to the standard of the CBSE schools in the cities. The rich and the poor have to be educated in a standardized manner without any disparity. The standardization has to be done from the grassroots level. Without this any change or alteration in the system will only create disparity and will not achieve its purpose. The recent report on way2Online says there are 820 schools in Tamil Nadu which have just one teacher to handle all the subjects for the students of 1st to 8th standard. Hence, we do not emphasise reservations, neither do we stand for the concept of 'One Size Fits All'. All we need is the capability approach which enables each citizen to grow and get placed according to his/her own merit. Ensuring equal opportunities for the rural students and making all educational facilities accessible to them would bring real transformation in our society. The inclusiveness approach and the importance of knowing the needs of the individual, as the educator St. John Bosco said, makes this system more relevant.

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