

## Original Article

# Educational Opportunities for Children of Municipal Sanitation Workers under NEP 2020: Challenges and Prospects

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### Abstract

Municipal sanitation workers in India remain one of the most marginalised occupational groups, historically tied to caste-based labour and exposed to severe socioeconomic deprivation, hazardous working conditions, and systemic exclusion. These disadvantages extend to their children, who often experience poverty, social stigma, poor educational access, low literacy levels, and high dropout rates, perpetuating an intergenerational cycle of marginalisation. India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 seeks to promote equity and inclusion by addressing the needs of socially and economically disadvantaged groups through initiatives such as foundational literacy and numeracy, vocational education, flexible learning pathways, and digital access. However, persistent challenges—including poverty, discrimination, limited awareness, and the digital divide—impede effective implementation. This paper analyses educational barriers faced by sanitation workers' children, evaluates NEP 2020's potential, and proposes targeted policy interventions to bridge gaps between policy vision and ground-level realities.

**Keywords:** Sanitation workers, Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), Educational barriers; NEP 2020, Caste-based occupations, Digital divide, Inclusive education, Socioeconomic vulnerability.

### Introduction

Sanitation workers in India represent one of the most marginalised occupational communities, historically tied to caste hierarchies and burdened with social stigma. Despite legal safeguards and welfare schemes, their children continue to face intergenerational barriers to education, limiting upward mobility and reinforcing cycles of exclusion. Education is often positioned as the key pathway to empowerment, yet evidence suggests that sanitation workers' children encounter disproportionate disadvantages at every stage of schooling. National surveys highlight a paradox. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER 2023) shows that enrolment among children aged 6–14 remains above 95%, but attendance declines sharply after the age of 14, with only 64% of adolescents (15–16 years) remaining in school. Similarly, the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS 2022–23) records a steep drop in attendance among the 14–17 age group, particularly among children from households engaged in casual, low-wage labor, categories into which most sanitation workers fall. Learning outcomes are equally concerning. ASER (2023) reports that only half of Grade 5 students can read a Grade 2 text or solve basic division. For sanitation workers' children, these gaps are aggravated by first-generation learner status, lack of academic support, and persistent classroom discrimination. Dropouts are further linked to early entry into the workforce, with PLFS data indicating that 12–15% of adolescents in poor urban households combine schooling with work. Gender adds another layer of exclusion, as girls frequently leave school after Class 8 due to childcare responsibilities and safety concerns.

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Although targeted scholarships and educational loan schemes exist, data from the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK) reveal limited uptake due to documentation barriers and low awareness. These patterns underscore systemic inequities that NEP 2020 explicitly seeks to redress under its Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) framework. Yet without strong monitoring and community-specific interventions, sanitation workers' children risk being left behind in India's broader vision of universal, equitable education.

### Review of the Literature

**H. M. Naveen (2022)**, the author in his paper, highlights how NEP 2020 envisions integrating vocational training within mainstream education. From the perspective of sanitation workers' children, this framework presents opportunities to break cycles of poverty and marginalization through skill-based learning and inclusive access to quality education. However, challenges remain, including socio-economic barriers, caste-based discrimination, and digital divides that limit participation. This paper emphasizes that while NEP 2020 offers pathways for empowerment, effective implementation and targeted support are essential for marginalized communities like sanitation workers' families.

**Jha & Parvati (2021)**, the authors in their paper, emphasize inclusive education and vocational training, creating scope for marginalized children to access better learning opportunities. For sanitation workers' children, this policy could reduce generational occupational dependency by equipping them with employable skills. The authors revealed persistent hurdles such as social stigma, financial instability, and lack of parental literacy that restrict educational attainment. While the NEP envisions holistic development, its success for marginalized groups depends on addressing structural inequities and implementing strong support mechanisms.

**Kumar & Singh (2022)**, The authors in their study highlighted that the NEP 2020's foundational literacy and digital learning provide opportunities

for bridging educational inequalities. For children of sanitation workers, digital access could enable upward mobility. Yet, unequal infrastructure, affordability issues, and the urban-rural divide pose serious obstacles. The authors in their study indicate that without targeted subsidies and community-level interventions, the digital gap will continue to marginalize these groups. NEP's vision remains aspirational unless reinforced by inclusive policies that prioritize marginalized children.

**Sharma (2021)**, the author in his study, explored that Vocational integration under NEP 2020 is crucial for sanitation workers' children as it opens alternate career paths beyond caste-based occupations. Studies note that vocational education enhances employability and reduces dropout rates among disadvantaged students. However, caste discrimination in schools and limited awareness among parents about educational reforms hinder effective participation. The author highlighted that NEP provides transformative potential; without community sensitization and anti-discrimination safeguards, sanitation workers' children may remain excluded from its benefits.

### Objectives of the Study

1. To identify the challenges faced by municipal sanitation workers' children in accessing education.
2. To compare the educational access, retention, and performance of sanitation workers' children in the pre-NEP and post-NEP 2020 periods.
3. To examine the opportunities NEP 2020 provides for sanitation workers' children in terms of literacy, vocational training, and higher education.

### Methodology of the study

This study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design based primarily on secondary data sources to examine the educational opportunities and challenges faced by the children of municipal sanitation workers in India, with a comparative focus on the pre-NEP 2020 and post-NEP 2020 periods.

### Data analysis and Interpretations

**Table 1: Educational Status of Sanitation Workers' Children**

Indicator	National Average (ASER/PLFS)	Sanitation Workers' Children (NCSK/NGOs)
Enrolment (6–14 yrs)	95.3%	90–92%
Enrolment (15–16 yrs)	64%	<50%
Literacy (Grade 5)	50% can read Gr. 2 text	<30%
Numeracy (Grade 5)	26% can do division	<15%
Out-of-school (14–17 yrs)	20%	30–35%
Pre-matric scholarship	N/A	2.3 lakh beneficiaries
Education loans (higher ed.)	N/A	<1,000 annually

Sources: ASER, 2023

The table highlights that while national enrolment in primary education remains high (95.3%), sanitation workers' children show slightly lower participation (90–92%). At the secondary level (15–16 years), their enrolment drops sharply to less than 50%, compared to 64% nationally, reflecting early dropouts. Learning outcomes are particularly weak, with less than 30% achieving basic literacy and under 15% achieving numeracy skills in Grade 5, far below national averages. The out-of-school rate

(14–17 years) is also much higher (30–35%) than the national level (20%), showing intergenerational barriers to education. While targeted schemes like the pre-matric scholarship reached 2.3 lakh children in 2021–22, their overall impact is limited due to low awareness and accessibility. Similarly, higher education loans remain underutilized, with fewer than 1,000 beneficiaries annually, underscoring structural and financial barriers for sanitation workers' children.

**Table 2: Broader Educational Trends: Before vs. After NEP 2020**

Indicator	Pre-NEP (≤2020/early)	Post-NEP (2024–25)
Reading (Grade III basic level)	20–27% (declining trend)	27.1% (recovered)
Reading (Grade V)	42.8%	48.8%
Arithmetic (Subtraction Grade III)	25.9%	33.7%
Arithmetic (Division Grade V)	25.6%	30.7%
Pre-primary enrolment (3-yr-olds)	68.1%	77.4%
Primary GER (I–V)	93%	Sustained
Secondary GER (IX–X)	77.4%	Improvement in retention, but uneven
Digital access (14–16 yrs)	Low	90% have smartphones; 82% digital literacy

Sources: ASER, 2023

The table shows that reading and arithmetic skills have modestly improved post-NEP 2020, with Grade V reading rising from 42.8% to 48.8% and division skills from 25.6% to 30.7%. Foundational learning recovery is visible after earlier declines, reflecting NEP's focus on basic competencies. Pre-primary enrolment also increased from 68.1% (2018) to 77.4% (2024), aligning with NEP's emphasis on Early Childhood Care and Education. Primary Gross Enrolment

Ratio (GER) has remained consistently high (93%), while secondary GER shows improvement in retention but remains uneven across states and socio-economic groups. A major transformation is seen in digital access, where smartphone ownership among 14–16-year-olds has surged to 90%, with 82% demonstrating digital literacy. These gains suggest NEP 2020's positive influence, but disparities persist, especially among marginalised groups.

**Table 3: Comparative Educational Status of Sanitation Workers' Children: Pre-NEP vs. Post-NEP 2020**

Indicator	Pre-NEP 2020 (Before 2020)	Post-NEP 2020 (2021–2024)
<b>Primary Enrolment (6–14 yrs)</b>	93–95% enrolled nationally; sanitation workers' children are largely enrolled, but irregular attendance due to poverty & stigma	Still >95% enrolled; sanitation workers' children benefit from universal enrolment drives
<b>Secondary Enrolment (14–17 yrs)</b>	Sharp decline: only 65–70% enrolled; higher dropout among sanitation workers' children due to early entry into work	PLFS 2022–23 shows 80% attendance, but sanitation workers' households still show higher dropouts at Class IX–X
<b>Learning Outcomes (Grade V reading &amp; math)</b>	Reading: 44% could read Grade II text; Division competency 27%	Reading improved to 49%; Division improved to 31% (ASER 2024); sanitation workers' children lag further due to first-generation learner status
<b>Scholarship Access (Pre-Matric/Post-Matric)</b>	1.5 lakh beneficiaries (2018–19); many eligible children excluded due to poor awareness & paperwork	2.3 lakh beneficiaries (2021–22); but uptake is still <40% of eligible students
<b>Higher Education (NSKFDC Education Loans)</b>	Very low utilisation: <500 beneficiaries nationwide in some years	Uptake improved slightly post-2020, but still fewer than 1,000 loans were disbursed annually
<b>Gender Gap (Girls' Dropout)</b>	Girls from sanitation households often dropped out after Class 8 due to childcare & safety concerns	Still persists; WIEGO (2021) & UNICEF (2022) confirm higher dropout among adolescent girls despite NEP's SEDG focus

<b>Digital Access (14–16 yrs)</b>	Pre-NEP: <40% had access to smartphones/internet; limited use for learning	Post-NEP (2024): 90% adolescents nationally own smartphones; 57% use for study; sanitation workers' children face affordability & digital literacy gaps
<b>Stigma &amp; Discrimination in Schools</b>	Bullying, caste discrimination, and absenteeism documented (Walters 2020)	Persisting issue; NEP 2020 inclusion focus not yet fully effective in addressing stigma

**Source:** PLFS 2023

The table shows that while primary enrolment remains high nationally, sanitation workers' children continue to face irregular attendance due to poverty and stigma. Secondary enrolment improved post-NEP 2020, yet sanitation households still report higher dropout rates at Class IX–X compared to the national trend. Learning outcomes have slightly improved nationally after NEP, but sanitation workers' children lag because of first-generation learner challenges. Access to scholarships and education loans has expanded, though uptake remains very low due to lack of awareness and procedural barriers. Gender gaps persist, with adolescent girls from sanitation families still dropping out disproportionately despite NEP's SEDG emphasis. Finally, while digital access surged nationally, affordability gaps and continued stigma and discrimination mean sanitation workers' children remain excluded from many of NEP 2020's benefits.

**Findings and Discussion**

1. High primary enrolment but irregularity persists – While >95% of children (including sanitation workers' children) are enrolled in primary school, irregular attendance due to poverty, stigma, and family responsibilities continues to undermine progress.
2. Sharp dropout at secondary level – National retention has improved post-NEP 2020, but sanitation workers' children still show higher dropout rates after Class VIII–X, often due to economic pressure and early entry into labour.
3. Learning outcomes lag significantly – Despite national improvements in reading (49%) and division (31%) post-NEP, sanitation workers' children remain 10–15 percentage points behind, reflecting first-generation learner disadvantages.
4. Scholarship schemes underutilised – Pre and post-matric scholarships expanded from 1.5 lakh to 2.3 lakh beneficiaries post-NEP, yet less than 40% of eligible sanitation workers' children access them due to lack of awareness and bureaucratic hurdles.
5. Higher education loans negligible – Even after NEP, <1,000 students annually from sanitation households benefit from NSKFDC loans,

showing persistent barriers to higher education transition.

6. Gender disparities endure – Adolescent girls from sanitation families continue to drop out disproportionately after Class 8, mainly due to childcare, household duties, and safety concerns, despite NEP's SEDG focus.
7. Digital divide widens – While national smartphone access among adolescents rose to 90% post-NEP, sanitation workers' children face affordability and digital literacy gaps, limiting participation in digital education initiatives.
8. Pre-primary access improved nationally, but not equally – NEP-driven rise in early childhood enrollment (77.4% in 2024) has not fully reached sanitation workers' families due to low awareness and lack of nearby facilities.
9. Persistent stigma in schools – Discrimination, bullying, and caste-based exclusion continue to affect sanitation workers' children despite NEP's inclusion framework, reinforcing intergenerational disadvantage.
10. Uneven policy impact – Overall, NEP 2020 has raised national educational indicators, but sanitation workers' children remain left behind in terms of learning quality, secondary transition, gender equity, and digital access, highlighting the gap between policy intent and ground reality.

**Conclusion**

The study highlights that while the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has created opportunities for inclusive and equitable education in India, its benefits remain unevenly distributed for children of municipal sanitation workers. Primary enrolment has reached near universality, but irregular attendance, high dropout at the secondary level, and low transition to higher education persist in this marginalized group. Despite policy measures such as scholarships, digital learning, and SEDG-focused interventions, sanitation workers' children continue to face structural barriers rooted in poverty, caste-based stigma, and limited parental literacy. Gender disparities and digital exclusion further deepen these inequalities. While NEP 2020 has positively influenced overall educational outcomes, sanitation

workers' children remain at the margins of these gains, requiring targeted interventions. Strengthening awareness, reducing administrative barriers, ensuring digital inclusion, and addressing social stigma are crucial steps to transform NEP's vision into a real pathway of upward mobility for sanitation workers' families.

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#### Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper

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