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Growing Demand for Education Reforms Revives Debate on Examination Integrity, Learning Outcomes and Institutional Governance in India

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Recent Developments:

- A **nationwide education reform debate** has gained momentum following prolonged protests demanding stronger measures against examination paper leaks, greater transparency in recruitment and entrance examinations, and systemic improvements in educational governance.
- **The discussion** has renewed focus on implementing the objectives of the **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020**, particularly competency-based learning, reduction of rote memorisation, teacher quality enhancement and examination reforms. The **Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024** also provides a legal framework to curb organised malpractices in public examinations.

Education Reform in India:

Meaning:

- **Education reform** refers to comprehensive structural changes aimed at improving the quality, accessibility, equity, accountability and relevance of the education system.
- **The objective** is to shift from a **rote learning-based model** towards a **student-centric, competency-based education system** that promotes critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving and lifelong learning.
- **Education** is increasingly viewed as a national developmental priority requiring long-term policy continuity beyond political considerations.

Present Status of India's Education System:

Major Indicators:

- **India** has significantly expanded enrolment across school and higher education during the last two decades.
- **Despite higher enrolment**, nearly **65.3%** of India's active workforce has not received any formal vocational training, resulting in a significant skill gap.
- **A large proportion** of the rural workforce continues to remain engaged in elementary or semi-skilled occupations, indicating a mismatch between educational qualifications and labour market requirements.
- **The rapid expansion** of higher education has not been matched by proportional growth in quality employment opportunities.

Major Challenges in the Education System:

Rote Learning-Oriented Assessment:

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- **Many examinations** continue to emphasise memorisation and factual recall instead of conceptual understanding and analytical ability.
- **High-stakes examinations** encourage repetitive preparation rather than inquiry-based learning and innovation.

Commercialisation of Coaching Culture:

- **The growing dependence** on coaching institutions has created a parallel education ecosystem outside formal schooling.
- **Single-attempt competitive examinations** increase financial pressure on families and widen educational inequalities.
- **Coaching hubs** have emerged because examination systems continue to reward repetitive test preparation.

Teacher Shortages and Faculty Vacancies:

- **Large numbers of teaching positions** remain vacant across schools, universities and premier higher educational institutions.
- **Delayed recruitment** adversely affects classroom teaching, research quality and student learning outcomes.

Limited Institutional Autonomy:

- **Educational institutions** often face excessive administrative control in academic and curricular decisions.
- **Restricted autonomy** reduces innovation, interdisciplinary learning and adaptation to regional developmental needs.

Weak Governance and Examination Integrity:

- **Recurring examination paper leaks** undermine public confidence in recruitment and admission processes.
- **Irregularities in examinations** affect fairness, transparency and merit-based selection.
- **Governance weaknesses** reduce the credibility of public institutions and examination agencies.

Skill Mismatch:

- **Academic curricula** frequently remain disconnected from industry requirements and emerging technologies.
- **Insufficient vocational education** contributes to graduate unemployment and underemployment.

Implications of Educational Challenges:

Demographic Dividend at Risk:

- **India's young population** may fail to generate sustained economic growth if education does not produce employable and skilled human resources.
- **Skill deficiencies** reduce labour productivity and innovation capacity.

Rising Social Inequality:

- **Economic disparities** increase when access to quality education depends upon expensive private institutions and coaching centres.
- **Students from disadvantaged backgrounds** face relatively lower opportunities in competitive examinations.

Credential Inflation:

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- **Increasing educational qualifications** without adequate employment generation reduce the economic value of academic degrees.
- **Highly qualified candidates** increasingly compete for relatively lower-level government and private sector jobs.

Declining Trust in Public Education:

- **Inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages and governance issues** encourage migration from government schools to private institutions.
- **Educational inequality** widens between urban and rural areas.

Economic Consequences:

- **Weak learning outcomes** reduce national productivity, innovation and global competitiveness.
- **Human capital deficiencies** directly affect long-term economic growth.

National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 and Education Reforms:

Competency-Based Learning:

- **NEP 2020** advocates conceptual understanding, critical thinking, creativity and multidisciplinary learning instead of rote memorisation.
- **Assessment reforms** emphasise application-oriented evaluation and continuous learning.

Curricular Flexibility:

- **The policy** promotes multidisciplinary education, multiple entry-exit options and holistic development.
- **Students** are encouraged to combine academic, vocational and skill-based education.

Teacher Development:

- **NEP 2020** recognises teachers as the foundation of educational transformation.
- **Continuous professional development** and merit-based recruitment receive significant emphasis.

Vocational Education:

- **The policy** aims to integrate vocational education with mainstream schooling.
- **The objective** is to ensure that at least **50%** of learners receive vocational exposure by **2025**.

Measures Required for Systemic Reforms:

Competency-Based Examination System:

- **National and Board examinations** should increasingly evaluate conceptual understanding, analytical reasoning, creativity and real-world problem-solving.
- **Assessment methods** should gradually reduce dependence on memory-based testing.

Strengthening Examination Integrity:

- **Technology-enabled monitoring, encrypted question paper transmission and stronger legal safeguards** should minimise examination malpractice.
- **Strict implementation** of the **Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024** can strengthen examination credibility.

Teacher Recruitment and Capacity Building:

- **Vacant teaching positions** should be filled through transparent and time-bound recruitment.
- **Continuous teacher training** should focus on pedagogy, digital education and competency-based teaching methods.

Institutional Autonomy with Accountability:

- **Universities and schools** should receive greater academic autonomy while maintaining transparent performance evaluation mechanisms.
- **Outcome-based governance** can improve educational quality and innovation.

Strengthening Public Education Infrastructure:

- **Investment** in digital infrastructure, laboratories, libraries, sanitation and teacher availability should receive priority.
- **Quality public education** can reduce excessive dependence on private coaching institutions.

Industry-Academia Linkages:

- **Curricula** should align with emerging sectors such as Artificial Intelligence, robotics, semiconductor manufacturing, biotechnology and green technologies.
- **Internships, apprenticeships and vocational partnerships** should become integral components of higher education.

Constitutional and Institutional Framework:

Constitutional Provisions:

- **Article 21A** guarantees the **Right to Education** for children between **6 and 14 years**.
- **Article 45** directs the State to provide early childhood care and education.
- **Article 46** promotes educational interests of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and weaker sections.
- **Education** is included in the **Concurrent List (42nd Constitutional Amendment, 1976)**, enabling both the Union and States to legislate.

Major Institutions:

- **Ministry of Education** formulates national education policies.
- **University Grants Commission (UGC)** regulates higher education standards.
- **National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT)** develops curriculum and learning resources.
- **National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC)** assesses quality in higher educational institutions.

UPSC Value Addition:

Important Terms:

- **Competency-Based Education:** A learning approach focusing on demonstrable knowledge, skills and application rather than memorisation.
- **Human Capital:** The collective knowledge, skills, health and abilities that enhance economic productivity.
- **Demographic Dividend:** Economic growth potential arising from a relatively large working-age population.

- **Outcome-Based Education:** An educational approach that evaluates measurable learning outcomes instead of instructional inputs.
- **Vocational Education:** Skill-oriented education preparing learners for specific occupations and industries.

Relevant Committees and Reports:

- **Kothari Commission (1964–66):** Recommended a common school system and equal educational opportunities.
- **National Education Policy, 1986 (Modified in 1992):** Focused on universalisation of education and teacher development.
- **Kasturirangan Committee (2019):** Prepared the draft leading to **National Education Policy 2020**.

Prelims Facts:

- **Education** falls under the **Concurrent List**.
- **Article 21A** provides the **Right to Education** for children aged **6–14 years**.
- **National Education Policy 2020** emphasises competency-based learning and multidisciplinary education.
- **Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024** aims to prevent organised cheating and examination paper leaks.
- **University Grants Commission** regulates standards in higher education.
- **National Council of Educational Research and Training** develops school curriculum and textbooks.
- **National Assessment and Accreditation Council** is responsible for accreditation of higher educational institutions