

SINGLE FILE

Keep politics out of education

Colleges need to be freed from the control of the government

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The National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET) has come under huge criticism after the death of 17-year-old student S. Anitha from Tamil Nadu, who failed to clear the examination. People against NEET argue that the exam imposes unreasonable demands on students from rural areas

who follow a lighter syllabus. Its supporters, on the other hand, say that NEET is a welcome push to improve the quality of school education in the State. The Tamil Nadu government, they believe, will now make efforts to improve the quality of education. Interestingly, both sides agree that the government has a crucial role to play in education. It's just that one group wants the Centre to be in charge, while others prefer the State government. This consensus among both sides is alarming because the root cause of the present crisis, which has distressed thousands of students in the State, lies in the politicisation of education.

Political football

As is evident to any keen observer, both the Centre and the State government have been more than willing to tweak college admission rules when it suits their political ambitions. The dumbing down of school education standards in Tamil Nadu under former Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi was the most notable of the various populist moves to appease rural voters. The Centre's behaviour has not been much different either. Its stance on NEET has fluctuated in tandem with its political equation with the ruling governments in Tamil Nadu. In fact, some may argue that the uncertainty created among students drew directly from the political games played around NEET. Such politicisation of education at various levels of government, however, is hardly surprising. Handing over the job of managing education to politicians will naturally bring political considerations into it. This will hold true regardless of whether it is the Centre or the State government that is in charge of education. So, pinning high hopes on either of them will only lead to disappointments in the future.

The only real solution in the long run is to keep politicians out of the business of education. Colleges need to be freed from the control of the government, which will naturally also free them from its populist diktats. They should be allowed to choose the tests, or other criteria, based on which they will admit students. Such a vibrant market for education, marked by free competition, will improve both the quality and the accessibility of education to the poor. Many, however, fear that in the absence of a central regulator, colleges will admit students without sufficient screening, which in turn calls for an all-India exam such as NEET. This is untrue. Colleges which have their reputation on the line will care more than the government about the quality of students they admit, which will reflect in their screening methods. Of course, colleges that employ questionable screening methods too will exist in such a market, but with commensurate reputation. On the other hand, the failure of government regulators such as the University Grants Commission to uphold education standards is already there for everyone to see.