

Making Identity through Education: Value Formation, Inequality, and the Multiple Selves of Indian Youth.

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Abstract

India is experiencing an unprecedented youth bulge, with young people navigating an education system that has expanded in reach but continues to produce uneven learning outcomes and completion rates across caste, class, gender and region (Educational Attainment of Youth in India: A review, 2025). In this context, education functions not only as a pathway to employment but as a decisive arena in which youth construct their social, cultural and economic identities, increasingly mediated by digital cultures. Drawing on a document-based methodology that synthesizes recent national statistics, policy frameworks and empirical studies on youth and education, the paper examines how formal educational institutions shape identities through experiences of belonging and exclusion, through value and culture rich or exam driven pedagogies, and through the promises and disappointments of labour market transitions (State of the Education Report for India 2024, 2024). The analysis highlights how inclusive, value oriented and culturally responsive practices can foster plural, ethical and future ready identities, while stratified access, narrow credentialism and uncritical digital engagement risk fragmenting youth identities and deepening social divides (Rhythms of learning: State of the education report for India 2024: Culture and arts in education, 2025). The paper argues that aligning equity, value education, arts and culture integration, vocational and holistic learning, and critical digital literacy is essential if making identity through education is to support a more just and cohesive Indian society rather than reproduce existing hierarchies (Achieving NEP goals through holistic education, 2023).

Keywords: Indian youth; identity formation; education and society; value education; culture and arts education; economic identity; digital youth culture.

1. Introduction and conceptual framework:

India stands at a pivotal demographic moment in which young people carry a disproportionate share of the country's developmental hopes and anxieties. Estimates suggest that more than 65 percent of India's population is below the age of 35, and roughly one in five Indians is in the 15 to 24 age group, making Indian youth one of the largest youth cohorts in the world (The major problems faced by Indian youth in 2025: Facts, figures and way forward, 2025). In such a context, education is not merely a pathway to jobs; it is a primary arena in which youth learn how to see themselves, how they believe others see them, and how they imagine their place in local communities, the nation and an increasingly globalized world (Youth, identity and development, n.d.; Youth, culture and identity formation, 2019).

At the same time, the Indian education system is undergoing complex changes marked by both expansion and fragmentation. On the one hand, there has been a substantial increase in schooling infrastructure, policies aiming at universalizing elementary education and a notable rise in enrolment in secondary and higher education over the past two decades (Educational Attainment of Youth in India: A review, 2025). On the other hand, recent analyses of Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE+) data reveal worrying trends: total enrolment in Grades I to XII declined by more than 20 million students between 2021-22 and 2023-24, and age appropriate enrolment ratios have fallen across primary and upper primary levels (UDISE+ 2022-23 and 2023-24 analysis, 2025).

These patterns indicate that while education remains central to youth imaginaries of success, the pathways through the system are uneven and increasingly stratified by class, caste, gender and region (Education without equity: Why India's 80.9% literacy rate fails to bridge the gender and regional divide, 2025).

The idea of "making identity through education" therefore requires a conceptual lens that attends to this complexity. Identity is understood here not as a fixed attribute but as an ongoing, relational process in which young people draw on available social categories, cultural narratives and material resources to construct a sense of "who they are" and "who they wish to become" (Youth, identity and development, n.d.). In the Indian context, youth identity is shaped by multiple, intersecting axes: caste and community background, gender norms, language and region, religious affiliations, economic position and exposure to global media (Youth, culture and identity formation, 2019). Education enters this picture as a powerful institution that can either widen or narrow the horizons within which identity work takes place.

Formal education introduces youth to curricular content, assessment regimes, peer cultures and institutional norms that carry implicit and explicit messages about merit, hierarchy, citizenship and desirable futures. School and college environments classify students in visible ways through grades, streams, language sections, scholarships and quotas, while simultaneously functioning as spaces where friendships, solidarities and antagonisms are formed (Educational Attainment of Youth in India: A review, 2025). For first generation learners, girls from conservative contexts or youth from marginalized castes, educational participation itself can be a profound act of identity assertion, signalling new roles in family and community. Yet, these same spaces may expose them to stigma, stereotyping or subtle exclusions that leave enduring marks on their sense of self (Education without equity: Why India's 80.9% literacy rate fails to bridge the gender and regional divide, 2025).

Policy frameworks over the last decade have begun to speak directly to these tensions. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 articulates a holistic vision of education that moves beyond rote learning and exam orientation, emphasizing critical thinking, creativity and multidisciplinary learning alongside a strong focus on ethics, constitutional values and respect for diversity (Achieving NEP goals through holistic education, 2023; Significance of value education in the context of NEP 2020, 2025). NEP 2020 explicitly calls for fostering "respect for the fundamental duties and responsibilities of citizens" and for developing empathy, compassion and humanistic values through curricular and co-curricular activities (Achieving NEP goals through holistic education, 2023). In doing so, it frames education not simply as human capital formation but as value and identity formation aimed at preparing young people for responsible participation in a democratic society.

This emphasis is reinforced at the international level by UNESCO's State of the Education Report for India 2024, which focuses on culture and arts in education. The report argues that culture and arts education can "enhance creativity, promote cultural diversity, and strengthen social cohesion," and proposes a set of goals including integrating arts in curricula, preserving traditional knowledge, strengthening arts ecosystems and leveraging digital technologies for cultural learning (Rhythms of learning: State of the education report for India 2024: Culture and arts in education, 2025). UNESCO's framing positions education as a key site where young people learn to appreciate both their own cultural heritage and that of others, thus shaping identities that can hold together local rootedness with openness to difference (State of the Education Report for India 2024, 2024).

The empirical landscape, however, shows that this normative vision coexists with persistent inequities. Reviews of educational attainment highlight substantial interstate and rural-urban gaps in secondary and higher education access, with youth from poorer households and historically disadvantaged social groups less likely to complete schooling or enter tertiary education (Educational Attainment of Youth in India: A review, 2025). National sample survey-based analyses suggest that while literacy has improved, the benefits of educational expansion are unevenly distributed, and the quality of learning remains highly variable, particularly in rural government schools (India's education evolution: Decoding NSS 2025 insights and NEP 2020 pathways, 2025; Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2023, 2023). These inequalities shape which young people can legitimately claim the identity of being "educated," with all its symbolic and economic implications, and which remain on the margins of this category.

Furthermore, rapid technological change and the spread of digital media have altered the symbolic environment in which youth interpret educational experiences. Research on Indian youth and technology shows that social media and online platforms provide new spaces for self expression, comparison and community building, allowing young people to curate public selves that may differ from offline roles (The role of technology in shaping youth identity, 2022; A sociological study of online self presentation and youth identity formation, 2019). At the same time, these digital arenas intensify exposure to globalized scripts of success, consumption and lifestyle, which can clash with local constraints and deepen feelings of inadequacy among those who struggle to meet these ideals (The transformative power of social media among India's youth, 2025). Education systems that ignore this digital dimension risk leaving youth to navigate complex identity pressures without guidance.

Against this backdrop, the central research concern of the paper is to analyze how education in India today shapes the social, cultural and economic identity of youth, and how these processes are mediated by inequalities and digital culture. The discussion proceeds in four substantive steps. First, it examines how educational institutions structure social identity through peer relations, experiences of inclusion or exclusion and everyday hierarchies around caste, class, gender and language. Second, it explores the role of education in cultural identity and value formation, focusing on the contrast between exam driven schooling and value rich, humanities and arts oriented programmes in light of NEP 2020 and SOER 2024. Third, it investigates the relationship between educational attainment, labour market outcomes and youth economic identities, paying attention to the divide between those who enter the "educated middle class" and those who exit early into precarious work. Fourth, it considers how digital and popular culture intersect with education to complicate identity work and what this implies for value rich, culturally responsive and equity oriented educational practice.

By weaving together demographic and enrolment data, policy documents and qualitative studies on youth culture and digital media, the paper argues that educational institutions in India function as decisive arenas where young people attempt to integrate tradition, modernity and global imaginaries into coherent or contested selves. It suggests that if education is to support inclusive, ethical and future ready identities, there is a need to align expansion with equity, to deepen value and culture centred pedagogy, and to systematically address the digital dimension of youth life. In this sense, the project of making identity through education is inseparable from the broader project of building a just, cohesive and sustainable Indian society (State of the Education Report for India 2024, 2024; Achieving NEP goals through holistic education, 2023).

2. Aim, objectives, methodology and scope:

2.1 Aim:

The aim of this paper is to critically examine how education in contemporary India shapes the social, cultural and economic identity of youth, and to explore how these identity processes are mediated by structural inequalities and emerging digital cultures (Educational Attainment of Youth in India: A review, 2025; State of the Education Report for India 2024, 2024).

2.2 Objectives:

To operationalize this aim, the paper pursues four interlinked objectives:

1. To analyse how schooling and higher education structure social identities of Indian youth through peer relations, institutional hierarchies and experiences of inclusion or exclusion across caste, class, gender, language and region (Youth, culture and identity formation, 2019; Education without equity, 2025).
2. To investigate how value education, humanities, culture and arts-based learning contribute to cultural identity and value formation, in contrast to exam centric and purely instrumental educational trajectories (Rhythms of learning, 2025; Integrating value education for holistic development, 2024).
3. To examine the relationship between educational attainment, labour market opportunities and youth economic identities, including the tensions between the “educated middle class” project and the lived realities of early school leavers and underemployed graduates (Education at a glance, 2022; India’s education evolution, 2025).
4. To explore how digital media and social platforms intersect with educational experiences and intersecting inequalities to shape contemporary youth identity work, and to identify implications for policy and institutional practice (The transformative power of social media among India’s youth, 2025; UNESCO Framework for Culture and Arts Education, 2024).

2.3 Methodology:

The paper adopts a document based, qualitative analytical methodology, drawing on four main clusters of secondary sources:

- Educational statistics and administrative data. UDISE+ 2022-23 and 2023-24 datasets and their analytical summaries are used to trace trends in enrolment, age appropriate participation and stage wise transition, providing the structural backdrop for discussions of opportunity and exclusion (UDISE+ 2022-23 & 2023-24: Preliminary analysis, 2025). National and international compilations such as OECD’s Education at a Glance and syntheses of NSS data further contextualise returns to education and distributional patterns (Education at a glance, 2022; India’s education evolution, 2025).
- Empirical and conceptual youth studies. Sociological and educational studies on youth culture, youth identity and intersectionality in Indian education provide conceptual tools for understanding identity as a relational, multi layered process (Youth, identity and development, n.d.; Youth, culture and identity formation, 2019; Caste, gender, and intersectionality in stream choice, 2023).

- Policy documents and normative frameworks. NEP 2020 and commentaries on its implementation, along with UNESCO's State of the Education Report for India 2024 and the global Framework for Culture and Arts Education, supply normative visions of holistic, value rich and culture centred education that are critically examined against empirical realities (Achieving NEP goals through holistic education, 2023; Rhythms of learning, 2025; UNESCO Framework for Culture and Arts Education, 2024).
- Research on digital media and youth. Recent Indian studies and reviews on social media, online self presentation and digital divides inform the discussion on how online environments intersect with educational experiences and structural inequalities in shaping youth identity (The transformative power of social media among India's youth, 2025; The impact of social media on Indian youth, 2023; Impact of social media on young people, 2025).

The analysis is interpretive and synthetic rather than statistical. It triangulates across these sources to build an integrated picture of identity formation through education, attentive to convergences, gaps and tensions. No primary fieldwork was undertaken; instead, the paper positions itself as a critical review and conceptual consolidation aimed at informing further empirical research and practice in design, planning and educational contexts.

2.4 Scope and limitations:

The scope of the paper is limited to youth broadly in the 15-29 age band, with most evidence drawn from school and higher education stages (Educational Attainment of Youth in India: A review, 2025). It takes a national view, using India wide data and studies, while recognising substantial state and regional variation (India's education evolution, 2025; State of the Education Report for India 2024, 2024). The focus is on formal education systems, though non formal learning and community contexts are acknowledged, and the analysis centres on social, cultural and economic identity with digital identity treated as a cross cutting dimension. Reliance on secondary sources and evolving datasets such as UDISE+ means that findings should be read as a critical synthesis rather than as definitive measurement (UDISE+ 2022-23 & 2023-24: Preliminary analysis, 2025).

3. Education and social identity of Indian youth:

Education in India unfolds within institutions that are not only sites of learning but also arenas where young people experience and negotiate belonging, hierarchy and recognition. School and college spaces bring together youth from diverse caste, class, gender and regional backgrounds, but they do so within structures that both open and constrain possibilities for social identity. Large scale reviews show that participation itself is uneven: youth from poorer households, rural areas and historically marginalized communities are significantly less likely to reach and complete secondary and higher education than their more privileged peers, which means that even the opportunity to engage in educationally mediated identity work is unequally distributed (Educational Attainment of Youth in India: A review, 2025). Where youth do enter and remain within institutions, everyday interactions with peers, teachers and administrative systems shape how they come to see themselves as competent or deficient, deserving or out of place, and as "educated" or "backward" in the eyes of others (Youth, identity and development, n.d.; Youth, culture and identity formation, 2019).

Within classrooms and campuses, peer groups function as powerful reference communities for social identity. Studies of youth culture in Indian colleges suggest that friendships and informal networks often form along lines of language, region and class, with English speaking, urban and higher income students tending to dominate visible spaces of leadership such as student councils and cultural committees (Youth, culture and identity formation, 2019). For first generation learners and students from rural or small town backgrounds, the transition into such environments can be both exhilarating and disorienting, offering new freedoms yet also exposing their unfamiliarity with dominant cultural codes, accents or styles of self presentation (Educational Attainment of Youth in India: A review, 2025). This asymmetry can encourage some students to withdraw and adopt a low profile, while others may consciously work to “fit in” by modifying speech, dress and social preferences, embedding identity work in very intimate everyday practices.

Caste remains a powerful axis along which social identity is organized in many institutions, despite constitutional safeguards. Media investigations and social science research document cases where Dalit and Adivasi students report being labelled as “quota students,” facing lower expectations from teachers, or encountering subtle forms of social exclusion, such as not being invited into certain peer circles or being treated as academically less capable (Education without equity: Why India’s 80.9% literacy rate fails to bridge the gender and regional divide, 2025). Such experiences communicate a message about their place in the educational hierarchy and, by extension, in the imagined national community. Reservation policies do open doors, but unless accompanied by institutional cultures that affirm the dignity and capability of marginalized students, they risk reinforcing stigmatized identities even as they expand access (Educational Attainment of Youth in India: A review, 2025).

Language is another crucial marker of social identity in educational settings. English medium education is widely associated with modernity, prestige and mobility, and youth who are fluent in English often acquire higher status among peers and teachers, especially in urban institutions (India’s education evolution: Decoding NSS 2025 insights and NEP 2020 pathways, 2025). Students educated primarily in regional languages may internalize feelings of inadequacy or inferiority, not because of lack of intelligence but because institutional and societal discourses equate English proficiency with sophistication and competence (Education without equity: Why India’s 80.9% literacy rate fails to bridge the gender and regional divide, 2025). This linguistic hierarchy shapes identity by signalling who counts as cosmopolitan and who is seen as provincial, affecting self confidence and willingness to participate in class discussions, debates or leadership roles.

Gendered norms and expectations further complicate the social identity landscape. Although gender gaps in basic literacy have narrowed, young women, particularly from rural and marginalized communities, still face greater obstacles in accessing and completing secondary and higher education due to early marriage, domestic responsibilities and safety concerns (India education statistics: ZipDo education reports 2025, 2025; Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2023, 2023). For girls who do attend school or college, educational spaces can be a source of empowerment, offering opportunities to develop voice, mobility and new aspirations. At the same time, they may encounter restrictive campus cultures that police dress, movement and interaction with male peers, or subtle assumptions that their education is secondary to future marriage and family roles (Education without equity: Why India’s 80.9% literacy rate fails to bridge the gender and regional divide, 2025). These contradictions force young women to negotiate identities that balance family expectations, personal ambitions and institutional norms, often under close scrutiny.

Regional and rural-urban divides also shape how youth position themselves socially. Youth from metropolitan cities who attend well resourced private or central schools often inhabit an identity of being at the “centre” of national modernity, with exposure to global curricula, extracurricular opportunities and digital connectivity (India’s education evolution: Decoding NSS 2025 insights and NEP 2020 pathways, 2025). By contrast, students from rural government schools may describe themselves as “left behind” or “less advanced,” particularly when they compare their facilities and perceived quality of education with images seen on media or through relatives in cities (Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2023, 2023). These perceptions are not only about material conditions but about where one stands in hierarchies of respectability and aspiration, which are central to social identity during youth.

Despite these stratifications, educational institutions can also become sites of solidarity and new forms of social identity that cut across inherited boundaries. Student clubs around arts, environment, debate or community service often bring together youth from diverse backgrounds around shared interests, allowing them to see one another beyond caste, class or regional labels (Rhythms of learning: State of the education report for India 2024: Culture and arts in education, 2025). Participation in theatre, music, or local heritage projects, for example, can foster a sense of collective ownership over culture and community, and encourage students to identify as collaborators rather than competitors (State of the Education Report for India 2024, 2024). Similarly, mentoring programmes and bridge courses designed for first generation or disadvantaged students can build confidence and social support, contributing to identities as capable learners who belong in higher education (Educational Attainment of Youth in India: A review, 2025).

The policy discourse acknowledges the importance of social inclusion for identity formation. NEP 2020 explicitly emphasizes inclusive education, calling for measures to support socio economically disadvantaged groups and to eliminate discrimination in schools and colleges (Achieving NEP goals through holistic education, 2023). It envisions institutions as spaces where every learner feels “respected and cared for,” highlighting the need for gender sensitization, awareness of constitutional values and practices that celebrate diversity (Significance of value education in the context of NEP 2020, 2025). UNESCO’s State of the Education Report for India 2024 likewise underscores that culture and arts education can support social cohesion and inclusion, particularly when it reflects the experiences and traditions of marginalized communities and regions (Rhythms of learning: State of the education report for India 2024: Culture and arts in education, 2025).

In practice, however, the social identity outcomes of education remain deeply uneven. Where pedagogies are authoritarian, classrooms segregated informally by background and institutional responses to discrimination weak or absent, students from marginalized groups may exit with identities marked by humiliation or alienation, even if they obtain formal credentials (Education without equity: Why India’s 80.9% literacy rate fails to bridge the gender and regional divide, 2025). Where institutions consciously cultivate inclusive cultures-through diverse curricula, participatory governance, anti discrimination policies and student support systems-youth are more likely to develop identities grounded in self respect, empathy and a sense of shared citizenship (State of the Education Report for India 2024, 2024).

Thus, education in India shapes the social identity of youth along at least two broad and intertwined paths. One path reproduces hierarchies of caste, class, gender, language and region, legitimizing them through narratives of individual merit and cultural superiority. The other path-still emergent but visible in policy frameworks and innovative practices-

seeks to transform these hierarchies by recognizing diversity, fostering solidarity and enabling previously marginalized youth to see themselves as rightful participants in the educational and national community. Whether the majority of Indian youth experience education as a ladder of exclusion or as a space of dignified belonging will depend on how deliberately institutions and policymakers engage with social identity as a core dimension of educational practice rather than as an incidental outcome (Educational Attainment of Youth in India: A review, 2025; Achieving NEP goals through holistic education, 2023).

4. Education, cultural identity and value formation:

Education in India is a central site where young people learn to locate themselves within cultural traditions, ethical frameworks and competing visions of what it means to live a good and meaningful life. Culture in this sense is not limited to the fine arts or heritage monuments; it includes everyday practices, languages, rituals and value systems through which communities organize social life and transmit meanings across generations (Youth, culture and identity formation, 2019). When youth enter schools and colleges, they encounter explicit lessons about history, civics and literature, but they also absorb implicit messages about whose knowledge counts, which languages are valued and what kinds of aspirations are considered legitimate. In this way, educational experiences shape cultural identity by mediating how young people relate to both local traditions and wider national and global narratives (Youth, identity and development, n.d.).

Recent policy and research give strong recognition to the cultural and ethical dimensions of education. The 2024 State of the Education Report for India, titled Rhythms of Learning, focuses entirely on culture and arts education, arguing that integrating culture and arts into education fosters creativity, promotes equitable learning, strengthens social cohesion and advances sustainable development (Rhythms of learning: State of the education report for India 2024: Culture and arts in education, 2025). The report, prepared for UNESCO's Regional Office for South Asia, highlights that in a country as culturally rich and diverse as India, neglecting culture and arts in education not only impoverishes learning but also weakens young people's ability to understand and respect diversity (UNESCO launches the 2024 State of the Education Report for India, 2024). It adapts UNESCO's global Framework for Culture and Arts Education to the Indian context and proposes strategies such as art integrated learning, preservation of traditional knowledge and the creation of a national repository for culture and arts education (UNESCO's 2024 report emphasizes the role of culture and arts education in India, 2025).

Parallel to this, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 positions value education and holistic development at the heart of the reformed education system. NEP 2020 emphasizes that education should develop not only cognitive skills but also social, ethical and emotional capacities, aiming to nurture "good human beings capable of rational thought and action" who are compassionate, resilient and grounded in constitutional values (Achieving NEP goals through holistic education, 2023). Analyses of NEP 2020 note that it calls for integrating value education across subjects through experiential, discussion based and inquiry oriented pedagogies, rather than treating values as an add on moral science period (NEP 2020 and holistic growth, 2024; Value education in NEP 2020, 2025). This shift reflects an understanding that cultural identity and ethical orientation emerge from the whole climate of learning - curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and the hidden curriculum of institutional life.

Scholarly work on value education foregrounds how such integration shapes youth identity. A recent paper on integrating value education for holistic development argues that NEP 2020 marks a transformative step by emphasizing empathy, integrity and respect for

diversity as core educational outcomes alongside academic achievement (Integrating value education for holistic development, 2024). The study highlights that value education, when meaningfully embedded, nurtures cognitive, emotional, social and ethical growth together, enabling learners to see themselves as responsible members of families, communities and the larger society (Integrating value education for holistic development, 2024). Other analyses of value based education in India similarly stress that when teachers consciously model and discuss values such as honesty, cooperation, non violence and environmental stewardship, students develop more reflective and socially responsible identities, rather than identities focused solely on personal success (Revitalizing education in India: Integrating value based education, 2023).

In practical terms, culture and value rich education often take the form of arts integration, local knowledge projects and community engagement. The UNESCO 2024 report documents case studies from Indian schools where art integrated learning is used to explore social issues like gender equality, environmental protection and communal harmony through theatre, music, storytelling and visual arts (Rhythms of learning: State of the education report for India 2024: Culture and arts in education, 2025). In such settings, students do not merely memorize textbook definitions; they embody roles, express emotions and translate abstract ideals into concrete actions, which deepens internalization. Teachers interviewed in the report note that these approaches help students appreciate their own cultural heritage and develop empathy for other groups, fostering identities that are simultaneously rooted and open (UNESCO report highlights transformative role of arts in Indian education, 2024).

By contrast, many young people still experience education primarily as exam driven and instrumental. Reviews of educational practice and attainment point out that in large parts of the system, especially in high stakes years, teaching is dominated by rote learning, coaching for standardized tests and narrow focus on marks (Educational Attainment of Youth in India: A review, 2025). In such contexts, students often describe themselves and others in competitive terms - rank holders, toppers, “weak” students - and measure self worth primarily through exam scores, streams and institutional brand names (India’s education evolution: Decoding NSS 2025 insights and NEP 2020 pathways, 2025). This exam centric culture tends to marginalize humanities, arts and co curricular activities, sending a message that these are not serious or valuable, which in turn shapes identity by equating “success” with narrow academic performance rather than balanced human development.

The tension between these two educational cultures - one value and culture rich, the other exam and credential driven - is visible in youth narratives. Qualitative accounts of college students suggest that those who have opportunities to study humanities, social sciences and arts, or to engage in community based projects, often articulate more layered self descriptions, acknowledging multiple identities tied to region, language, gender, profession and citizenship (Youth, culture and identity formation, 2019). They are more likely to speak about social responsibility, ethical dilemmas and appreciation of diversity as part of their educational journey (Integrating value education for holistic development, 2024). In contrast, students whose schooling has been dominated by coaching culture frequently narrate identity in purely instrumental terms, emphasizing the need to “crack” exams and secure salaried jobs, with less space to reflect on values, relationships or structural inequalities (Educational Attainment of Youth in India: A review, 2025).

It is important, however, not to romanticize value education or culture and arts integration as automatically inclusive. The content and framing of values matter. Critics caution that value education can sometimes reinforce conservative social norms - for example, by

valorizing obedience and conformity over critical thinking, or by presenting idealized images of gender and family that marginalize non dominant identities (Value education in NEP 2020, 2025). Similarly, culture and arts education can become tokenistic if it showcases certain classical or dominant cultural forms while ignoring the lived cultures of marginalized communities and regions (UNESCO New Delhi Office launches State of the Education Report for India 2024, 2024). For education to support genuinely plural and emancipatory cultural identities, curricula and pedagogies must be attentive to whose stories are told, whose art forms are honoured and who gets to speak in the classroom.

NEP 2020 and the 2024 UNESCO report both acknowledge this challenge and point towards more inclusive approaches. NEP 2020 calls for integrating Indian Knowledge Systems, including local knowledge, folk traditions and regional languages, into mainstream education, recognizing their value for sustainable living and ethical orientation (NEP 2020 and holistic development of students, 2023). The UNESCO report recommends strengthening rural urban connections, enhancing teaching capacity in arts education and using technology to make diverse cultural resources accessible, so that students from all backgrounds can see their cultures reflected and valued in school (UNESCO's 2024 report emphasizes the role of culture and arts education in India, 2025). When implemented thoughtfully, these measures can support identities that take pride in local cultures while engaging critically and creatively with global influences.

For Indian youth, therefore, education shapes cultural identity and value formation along multiple, intersecting lines. Where culture and arts, humanities and value education are meaningfully integrated, youth are more likely to develop reflective, plural and ethically grounded identities that can navigate the tensions between tradition and modernity. Where education remains narrowly exam driven and competitive, identity tends to be more instrumental, focused on individual advancement and external validation. In the next section, these cultural and ethical dimensions are linked to the economic aspect of identity, exploring how educational credentials, labour market outcomes and aspirations combine to create fragmented or coherent economic selves for India's young people (Educational Attainment of Youth in India: A review, 2025; Achieving NEP goals through holistic education, 2023).

5. Education and economic identity in a changing India:

Economic identity refers to how young people see themselves in relation to work, income, status and future life chances, and it is deeply shaped by their educational trajectories. In India, education has long been framed as the primary route to upward mobility, entry into the "middle class" and escape from agrarian or informal labour. Yet the empirical picture shows a more complex and uneven relationship between educational attainment and economic outcomes. International data indicate that individuals with tertiary education in India enjoy substantially higher earnings and better employment prospects than those with only primary schooling, reflecting the general pattern that higher education yields higher returns (Education at a glance: Country note - India, 2022). At the same time, domestic analyses reveal persistent dropout at secondary level, variable quality in higher education and rising concerns about graduate unemployment and underemployment, all of which complicate how youth internalize the link between education and economic identity (Educational Attainment of Youth in India: A review, 2025; India's education evolution: Decoding NSS 2025 insights and NEP 2020 pathways, 2025).

A first layer of this complexity lies in unequal access to the levels of education that yield the most significant economic returns. UDISE+ data for 2022-23 and 2023-24 show that while India's school system serves around 248 million students, enrolment declines as

students move up the grades (UDISE+ 2022-23 and 2023-24 analysis, 2025). The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) at primary level fell from 103.4 percent in 2021-22 to 93.0 percent in 2023-24, and the Net Enrolment Ratio (NER) at primary dropped from 92.7 percent in 2020-21 to 79 percent in 2023-24, suggesting that a significant share of children are not in age appropriate grades (UDISE+ 2022-23 and 2023-24 analysis, 2025). At upper primary level, GER declined from 94.7 to 89.7 percent between 2021-22 and 2023-24, while NER fell from 74.1 to 66 percent, and at secondary level the NER hovers at about 48 percent (UDISE+ 2022-23 and 2023-24 analysis, 2025). These figures mean that a large proportion of Indian youth never reach or complete secondary schooling, let alone tertiary education, and thus remain excluded from the higher earning segments of the labour market.

For those who do complete secondary and pursue higher education, economic identity is often closely tied to the idea of joining the “educated middle class.” Youth in this segment typically imagine themselves as salaried professionals, civil servants or entrepreneurs living in urban settings and consuming particular lifestyles, from housing and cars to digital gadgets and travel, that symbolize success (The major problems faced by Indian youth in 2025: Facts, figures and way forward, 2025). Their educational credentials - board exam marks, engineering or professional degrees, and institutional brand names - become central markers of self worth and social status, both offline and on social media. As a result, educational institutions are not only training grounds for skills but also key sites where economic aspirations and class identities are rehearsed and legitimized (Youth, culture and identity formation, 2019).

However, the pathway from education to secure employment is far from guaranteed. Analyses of NSS data and policy commentary note that many graduates enter an increasingly competitive labour market characterized by limited formal sector jobs, automation in some industries and a large informal sector that offers precarious, low paid work (India’s education evolution: Decoding NSS 2025 insights and NEP 2020 pathways, 2025). Government statements acknowledge these challenges; for instance, the Union Budget 2025-26 highlights the need to “measure the pulse of Indian education” and invest in skilling, digital infrastructure and quality improvements to align education with evolving economic needs (Measuring the pulse of Indian education, 2025). When youth who have internalized strong narratives equating education with success encounter underemployment or repeated exam failures, their economic identity can become fragile, oscillating between pride in their educational achievements and frustration at the system.

For youth who leave school early, economic identity is shaped by different experiences. Many enter informal labour markets as casual workers, domestic workers, agricultural labourers or small traders, often with limited social protection and unpredictable incomes (Educational Attainment of Youth in India: A review, 2025). Without recognized credentials, they may find it difficult to access better paid jobs or make claims to upward mobility, even when they possess significant skills acquired informally. In social discourse, they are frequently labelled as “uneducated” or “less educated,” a categorization that carries moral and status implications beyond the purely economic. Such labels can lead to internalized feelings of inferiority, particularly when these youth compare themselves to peers who have remained in education and adopted middle class lifestyles (Education without equity: Why India’s 80.9% literacy rate fails to bridge the gender and regional divide, 2025).

The divide between these trajectories produces what can be called fragmented economic identities among Indian youth. On one side, there is a growing cohort whose identity is anchored in being formally educated and aspiring to white collar or professional roles, but

whose actual employment conditions may be uncertain or delayed. On the other side, there is a large group whose identity is grounded in informal work and immediate income needs, often accompanied by a sense that the formal education system has failed or excluded them. The gap between the promise and reality of education - visible in high stakes exam stress, intense competition for a limited number of prestigious positions and the shadow of unemployment - feeds into broader feelings of anxiety and disillusionment among youth about their economic futures (The major problems faced by Indian youth in 2025: Facts, figures and way forward, 2025).

Policy reforms have begun to address this mismatch by emphasizing skills, vocational education and holistic development. NEP 2020 advocates for integrating vocational education into mainstream schooling from Class 6 onwards, with at least 50 percent of learners gaining exposure to vocational fields by 2025-2030, aiming to reduce the social stigma attached to non academic work and to prepare youth for a wider range of livelihoods (Achieving NEP goals through holistic education, 2023). It also promotes internships, local crafts and experiential learning with communities and industries, so that students can relate academic knowledge to real world economic activities (NEP 2020 and holistic development of students, 2023). Analyses of NEP 2020 argue that such shifts can help redefine economic identity by validating diverse forms of work and breaking the rigid hierarchy that places certain professions and degrees above others (Assessing NEP 2020's influence on holistic growth, 2024).

Value education and holistic development, discussed in the previous section, are also relevant to economic identity. Scholars emphasize that when education nurtures empathy, integrity and a sense of social responsibility alongside cognitive skills, youth are more likely to conceptualize economic success in ways that include ethical considerations, sustainability and community well being, rather than purely individual accumulation (Integrating value education for holistic development, 2024). For instance, students exposed to community service, environmental projects or social entrepreneurship programmes may envision careers that balance personal livelihood with social impact. This can diversify economic identities beyond a narrow focus on government jobs or corporate positions, incorporating roles as community leaders, social innovators or local entrepreneurs.

Nevertheless, structural inequalities continue to shape who can access these opportunities. Youth from rural and marginalized backgrounds may have less access to high quality vocational programmes, internships or exposure to diverse career paths, even when policies formally guarantee such provisions (Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2023, 2023). They may also lack social networks, guidance and financial buffers that enable more privileged youth to take risks, such as starting a business or pursuing non traditional careers. As a result, their economic identities may remain constrained by immediate survival needs and inherited occupational structures, despite policy aspirations for flexibility and choice (India's education evolution: Decoding NSS 2025 insights and NEP 2020 pathways, 2025).

Digital culture adds yet another dimension to economic identity. Social media feeds are saturated with narratives of entrepreneurial success, coding boot camps, "hustle" culture and global career opportunities. Indian youth use these digital spaces to learn skills, network and showcase their talents, but they are also exposed to idealized images of success that may be difficult to attain (The transformative power of social media among India's youth, 2025). For some, online platforms open concrete economic opportunities, such as freelancing, content creation or digital marketing. For others, particularly those with limited digital literacy or resources, the gap between online aspirational imagery and offline economic reality can deepen a sense of inadequacy. Education that incorporates critical

digital and financial literacy can help youth interpret these narratives more realistically, make informed decisions and build economic identities grounded in both ambition and self awareness (The role of technology in shaping youth identity, 2022).

In sum, education shapes the economic identity of Indian youth by determining who gains access to higher levels of learning, what kinds of skills and credentials they acquire, how they imagine their place in the labour market and which forms of work they regard as respectable or desirable. The current landscape produces both empowered and fragile identities: empowered, when education leads to meaningful participation in diversified economies; fragile, when expectations raised by schooling clash with limited opportunities. Policy initiatives like NEP 2020's focus on vocational integration, holistic development and experiential learning offer avenues to align educational experiences more closely with realistic, dignified economic futures for a broader spectrum of youth (Achieving NEP goals through holistic education, 2023; Assessing NEP 2020's influence on holistic growth, 2024). Whether these initiatives can counteract deep seated inequalities and recalibrate the link between education and economic identity remains a crucial question for India's development trajectory.

6. Digital culture, intersecting inequalities and implications for practice:

Digital technologies and social media have become integral to how Indian youth experience education and construct their identities. Smartphones and inexpensive data plans have dramatically expanded internet access, enabling young people from a wide range of backgrounds to participate in online platforms, consume global content and curate digital selves (The transformative power of social media among India's youth, 2025). Studies of social media and youth identity in India emphasize that platforms like Instagram, YouTube and WhatsApp function both as spaces of self expression and as arenas of social comparison and pressure (The impact of social media on Indian youth, 2023; The impact of social media on youth identity, 2024). Young people post images, opinions and achievements that signal who they are or wish to be, while simultaneously interpreting the likes, comments and follower counts of others as indicators of status and desirability.

This digital environment intersects closely with educational experiences. Students use social media for academic support, information about careers and entrance exams, and to follow role models who embody particular educational and professional paths (The transformative power of social media among India's youth, 2025). For first generation learners and youth in rural or small town settings, online platforms can offer exposure to alternative educational opportunities, scholarships and skill building resources that are not readily available offline (Understanding rural youth identities in India, 2024). However, the same platforms also present highly curated images of success - top institutions, foreign universities, corporate lifestyles - that may be out of reach for many. When these images are internalised uncritically, youth who face financial or structural barriers in education may feel a heightened sense of inadequacy or failure, even if they are doing reasonably well in their local contexts (Impact of social media on young people, 2025).

Research consistently underscores the dual nature of social media's impact on identity. A recent study on the transformative power of social media among Indian youth found that online interactions enhance self expression and connectedness for many young people, with around 40 percent of participants reporting positive effects on self image and personal values (The transformative power of social media among India's youth, 2025). At the same time, about a quarter reported negative effects such as increased anxiety, body image concerns and pressure to conform to prevailing trends (The transformative power of social media among India's youth, 2025). These findings echo broader analyses that describe

social media as a “double edged sword” for youth, capable of supporting creativity, peer solidarity and civic engagement, but also of intensifying bullying, polarization and mental health challenges (The impact of social media on youth: A double edged sword, 2024).

Digital culture also interacts with longstanding inequalities related to caste, gender and region in education. While internet access has expanded, digital divides persist: rural youth, girls and those from low income households are less likely to have personal devices, stable connectivity or safe spaces for online learning, which limits their ability to participate fully in digital education and identity formation (Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2023, 2023). Even when access is available, online spaces may reproduce offline hierarchies. English speaking, urban and upper caste youth often dominate influential online discourses about education and success, while voices from marginalized communities may be underrepresented or subject to trolling and harassment (Intersectionality: A report on discrimination based on caste, 2019). In some cases, caste and gender based abuse has been documented in digital classrooms and platforms, demonstrating that technology does not automatically eliminate discrimination (Intersectionality: A report on discrimination based on caste, 2019).

Intersectional research on caste and gender in Indian education offers important insights into how these identities shape educational choices and outcomes. A quantitative study on stream choice at the higher secondary level found that female students and those from historically disadvantaged castes (SC and OBC) are significantly less likely to choose the science stream than males and upper caste students, even after controlling for household and school factors (Caste, gender, and intersectionality in stream choice, 2023). The interaction of caste and gender produced additive disadvantages for SC and OBC girls, suggesting that they face multiple layers of constraint in accessing STEM pathways that are strongly associated with high status careers (Caste, gender, and intersectionality in stream choice, 2023). Such patterns highlight that educational structures channel different groups of youth into different identity trajectories long before labour market entry, shaping how they imagine their economic and social futures.

Broader intersectional analyses emphasize that discrimination and inequality in India cannot be understood by looking at a single axis of identity - such as caste or gender - in isolation (Intersectionality: A report on discrimination based on caste, 2019). For example, a Dalit girl with a disability in a rural area may face compounded barriers in accessing higher education due to the combined effects of caste prejudice, gender norms, infrastructural gaps and ableism (Intersectionality: A report on discrimination based on caste, 2019). These layered exclusions affect not only her educational outcomes but also her identity as a learner and citizen. Educational institutions that fail to recognize and address such intersectional realities risk reinforcing identities of marginalization, even if they formally adopt inclusive policies.

Policy frameworks and international guidelines are increasingly attentive to these challenges. The UNESCO Framework for Culture and Arts Education stresses that all learners and educators should have equitable and inclusive access to infrastructure, resources and learning opportunities, and that culture and arts education should address the digital divide and imbalances in cultural diversity online (UNESCO Framework for Culture and Arts Education, 2024). It calls for equipping learners with media and information literacy skills to navigate digital environments critically, appreciate cultural diversity and participate actively in democratic life (UNESCO Framework for Culture and Arts Education, 2024). Similarly, UNESCO’s 2024 State of the Education Report for India emphasizes that culture and arts education can promote inclusive and equitable education,

strengthen social cohesion and advance sustainable development when it reflects the experiences of diverse communities and leverages technology thoughtfully (State of the Education Report for India 2024, 2024; UNESCO launches the 2024 State of the Education Report for India, 2024).

For practice, these insights translate into several key implications. First, educational institutions need to treat digital literacy not only as a technical skill but as an ethical and critical capacity, helping youth understand how algorithms, images and online interactions shape identity and social relations (The role of social media in shaping modern identity, 2024). Classroom discussions, projects and guidance counselling can support students in interpreting online narratives of success, beauty and lifestyle with a reflective lens, reducing the risk of harmful comparisons and identity fragmentation. Second, schools and colleges must design inclusion strategies that explicitly address intersecting inequalities, such as targeted scholarships and mentoring for SC and ST girls in STEM, safe and accessible digital labs for rural and low income students, and strong policies against casteist and gender based harassment both offline and online (Caste, gender, and intersectionality in stream choice, 2023; Intersectionality: A report on discrimination based on caste, 2019).

Third, integrating culture and arts, local knowledge and value education into mainstream curricula - as advocated by NEP 2020 and UNESCO - can offer youth alternative identity resources beyond narrow exam and social media metrics, enabling them to see themselves as creative, ethical and culturally rooted individuals with multiple ways of contributing to society (Rhythms of learning: State of the education report for India 2024: Culture and arts in education, 2025; Integrating value education for holistic development, 2024). Such practices can be particularly empowering for marginalized youth who may not see themselves in dominant images of success but can find pride and recognition in their languages, arts, histories and community roles.

Ultimately, the intersection of digital culture and structural inequalities makes the task of “making identity through education” more demanding but also more urgent. Education systems that recognize digital environments as part of the learning ecosystem, attend to intersecting inequalities and invest in value rich, culturally responsive pedagogies are better placed to help Indian youth build identities that are resilient, inclusive and future ready. This requires sustained commitment from policymakers, educators and communities to see identity formation not as a by product but as a central purpose of education in a rapidly changing society (State of the Education Report for India 2024, 2024; UNESCO Framework for Culture and Arts Education, 2024).

7. Conclusion and overall implications:

Education in contemporary India operates as a dense and contested arena in which young people build their social, cultural, economic and digital identities under conditions of rapid change and persistent inequality. Demographic and administrative data show that while the education system serves nearly 25 crore school students, enrolment thins significantly as cohorts move from primary to upper primary and secondary stages, with Net Enrolment Ratios at primary falling to 79 percent and at secondary to around 48 percent by 2023-24 (UDISE+ 2022-23 and 2023-24 analysis, 2025). These structural patterns mean that the opportunity to “make identity through education” is unevenly distributed, with disadvantaged youth more likely to experience truncated schooling and limited access to higher education, shaping identities marked by exclusion rather than belonging (Educational Attainment of Youth in India: A review, 2025).

Across the preceding sections, three broad findings emerge. First, education profoundly structures social identity by organizing everyday experiences of peer relations, caste and gender hierarchies, linguistic status and regional divides. Caste and language based stigmas, gendered expectations and rural-urban disparities are reproduced inside institutions through subtle and overt practices, affecting whether youth see themselves as legitimate learners and equal participants in the national community (Education without equity: Why India's 80.9% literacy rate fails to bridge the gender and regional divide, 2025; Youth, culture and identity formation, 2019). At the same time, inclusive practices - mentoring, student clubs, arts and community projects - can foster solidarities that cut across these boundaries, enabling more dignified and plural social identities (State of the Education Report for India 2024, 2024).

Second, education plays a decisive role in cultural identity and value formation, especially where culture, arts, humanities and value education are meaningfully integrated. NEP 2020 and UNESCO's State of the Education Report for India 2024 jointly signal a normative shift towards holistic, value rich, culture centred education that seeks to nurture empathy, respect for diversity and creative engagement with heritage (Achieving NEP goals through holistic education, 2023; Rhythms of learning: State of the education report for India 2024: Culture and arts in education, 2025). Empirical and conceptual work on value education suggests that when such approaches are implemented thoughtfully, youth tend to articulate more reflective, ethically grounded and plural identities, in contrast to the narrower, exam driven and instrumental identities fostered by purely competitive, test centred regimes (Integrating value education for holistic development, 2024; Educational Attainment of Youth in India: A review, 2025).

Third, the relationship between education and economic identity is both enabling and fragile. Higher levels of education are associated with better employment prospects and higher earnings, making formal qualifications central to middle class identity and aspirations (Education at a glance: Country note - India, 2022). Yet the combination of high dropout rates at secondary level, variable quality in higher education and limited formal sector jobs produces fragmented economic identities: some youth see themselves as "educated" but underemployed or stuck in exam cycles, while others internalize stigmatized identities as "uneducated" informal workers despite substantial skills (India's education evolution: Decoding NSS 2025 insights and NEP 2020 pathways, 2025; The major problems faced by Indian youth in 2025: Facts, figures and way forward, 2025). NEP 2020's emphasis on vocational integration, experiential learning and multiple pathways to livelihood offers an important, though still unfolding, attempt to rebalance these trajectories (Achieving NEP goals through holistic education, 2023; Assessing NEP 2020's influence on holistic growth, 2024).

Overlaying all these dimensions is digital culture, which reshapes identity work by exposing youth to globalized scripts of success, lifestyle and education while simultaneously providing tools for self expression, learning and networking. Social media studies highlight that online platforms are experienced by Indian youth as both empowering and anxiety inducing, amplifying opportunities for visibility and creativity but also intensifying comparison, body image concerns and performance pressure (The transformative power of social media among India's youth, 2025; Impact of social media on young people, 2025). Digital divides by caste, gender and region mean that access to these identity resources is itself unequal, and online spaces may reproduce offline hierarchies and forms of discrimination unless mediated through critical digital literacy and strong institutional safeguards (Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2023, 2023; Intersectionality: A report on discrimination based on caste, 2019).

Taken together, this analysis supports several overarching implications.

7.1 Equity as a precondition for inclusive identity making:

Efforts to strengthen identity formation through education must begin with closing gaps in access, retention and quality at primary, secondary and higher levels, especially for rural, female, Dalit, Adivasi and low-income youth. This entails targeted financial support, improved infrastructure, safe transport and robust support services that address the structural causes of dropout and underachievement (UDISE+ 2022-23 and 2023-24 analysis, 2025; Education without equity: Why India's 80.9% literacy rate fails to bridge the gender and regional divide, 2025).

7.2 Embedding value rich, culturally responsive pedagogy:

NEP 2020 and SOER 2024 provide a strong normative foundation for integrating culture, arts, local knowledge and value education across curricula. Realizing this vision requires investment in teacher preparation, locally relevant learning materials and assessment reforms that recognize creativity, ethical reasoning and cultural engagement as core outcomes, not peripheral extras (Rhythms of learning: State of the education report for India 2024: Culture and arts in education, 2025; Integrating value education for holistic development, 2024).

7.3 Aligning education with diverse, dignified economic futures:

Expanding vocational education, internships and community based learning, as envisaged in NEP 2020, can help validate multiple forms of work and reduce the overconcentration of aspiration on a narrow set of white collar roles. This can support economic identities that combine ambition with realism and respect for varied livelihoods, particularly if such programmes are accessible to marginalized youth and linked to local economies (Achieving NEP goals through holistic education, 2023; Assessing NEP 2020's influence on holistic growth, 2024).

7.4 Treating digital environments as part of the educational ecosystem:

Integrating critical media and information literacy, online ethics and reflective use of social media into formal education can help youth navigate digital culture in ways that strengthen rather than fragment their sense of self. This should go hand in hand with efforts to close digital divides and to protect students from caste and gender based harassment in online spaces (The role of technology in shaping youth identity, 2022; UNESCO Framework for Culture and Arts Education, 2024).

Ultimately, making identity through education in India is inseparable from the wider project of democratic nation building in a highly diverse, deeply unequal and rapidly globalizing society. When educational institutions align expansion with equity, embed value rich and culturally grounded learning, and address both economic realities and digital cultures, they can become decisive arenas where youth construct inclusive, ethical and future ready identities. In doing so, education can contribute not just to individual advancement but to a more just and cohesive India in which young people from all backgrounds recognize themselves as rightful authors of their own stories and co creators of the country's social and developmental trajectory (State of the Education Report for India 2024, 2024; Achieving NEP goals through holistic education, 2023).

Conclusion:

Education in contemporary India is a decisive arena where young people craft their social, cultural, economic and digital identities under conditions of demographic pressure, policy

reform and entrenched inequality. Administrative data show that, although India's school system serves nearly 25 crore students, age appropriate participation declines sharply beyond primary level, with the Net Enrolment Ratio at primary falling to 79 percent and at secondary to around 48 percent in 2023-24, limiting who can build identities as "educated" citizens through sustained schooling (UDISE+ 2022-23 & 2023-24: Preliminary analysis, 2025). Reviews of youth educational attainment further reveal persistent gaps by caste, gender, region and socio economic status, underscoring that the experience of education as inclusion or exclusion remains highly stratified (Educational Attainment of Youth in India: A review, 2025).

Across the paper, the analysis shows that education shapes social identity by organizing everyday experiences of belonging, stigma and recognition in relation to caste, class, gender, language and region, while also offering spaces for new solidarities where institutions invest in inclusive practices (Education without equity: Why India's 80.9% literacy rate fails to bridge the gender and regional divide, 2025; State of the Education Report for India 2024, 2024). It shapes cultural identity and value formation through curricula, pedagogies and institutional cultures that can either narrow youth imaginaries to exam performance or, as envisaged by NEP 2020 and UNESCO's Rhythms of Learning, cultivate plural, ethical and reflective identities grounded in culture, arts and constitutional values (Achieving NEP goals through holistic education, 2023; Rhythms of learning: State of the education report for India 2024: Culture and arts in education, 2025). It structures economic identity by determining which youth reach higher education and valued credentials, who enters precarious informal work and how young people internalize the promise and limits of education as a route to mobility (Education at a glance: Country note - India, 2022; India's education evolution: Decoding NSS 2025 insights and NEP 2020 pathways, 2025).

Digital culture and intersecting inequalities amplify these dynamics. Social media offers Indian youth powerful tools for self expression, learning and networking, but also intensifies comparison, anxiety and exposure to discrimination, with digital divides and online harassment mirroring offline hierarchies of caste, gender and region (The transformative power of social media among India's youth, 2025; Intersectionality: A report on discrimination based on caste, 2019). Frameworks such as UNESCO's Culture and Arts Education guidelines and NEP 2020's holistic vision indicate that identity formation must be recognized as a central purpose of education, not a side effect, and that equity, value education, cultural responsiveness and critical digital literacy are key levers for more inclusive outcomes (UNESCO Framework for Culture and Arts Education, 2024; Significance of value education in the context of NEP 2020, 2025).

If these levers are strengthened, educational institutions can help Indian youth integrate tradition, modernity and global imaginaries into identities that are resilient, ethical and open to diversity, rather than fractured by exclusion or narrowed by hyper competitive pressures. In that sense, making identity through education is inseparable from the larger project of building a more just, cohesive and sustainable India in which young people from all backgrounds can recognize themselves as rightful authors of their own futures and as co creators of the country's developmental trajectory (State of the Education Report for India 2024, 2024; Achieving NEP goals through holistic education, 2023).

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