

St-Anthony's School Dugawar : Our small students celebrate their passage to class 1 in front of the statue of Saint-Anthony !



## India's New Education Reforms

India is embarking on a transformative journey in education through its *National Education Policy 2020*. A major step in this direction is the launch of the Automated Permanent Academic Account Registry (APAAR) — known as the « One Nation, One Student ID » system.

This initiative provides every student with a unique digital identity, linking their academic records from primary school through higher education. Schools are currently registering every student for this Unique ID by uploading student data such as ID card, birth certificate, and previous school records.

For years, systemic flaws allowed public schools to inflate enrollment numbers and misuse government funds. Now, the administration is prioritizing accountability and functionality in these institutions. Meanwhile, as public schools struggle, private schools have emerged in rural areas, often attracting parents dissatisfied with government-run alternatives. However, many of these private schools operate without adequate infrastructure or qualified teachers. The government is now shutting down non-compliant insti-

tutions while working to revitalize public education.

The APAAR ID will bring much-needed transparency by securely tracking each student's academic progress, making such misuse significantly harder. Yet, the government's push to shut down unrecognized private schools in rural areas could leave thousands of students without access to education.

Private schools, even if substandard, often provide better attendance and basic English-medium instruction, which poor families prefer. The non-compliance issue may ultimately harm the poor more than help them.

Many of these unofficial small private schools operate without formal recognition or proper licensing. They often serve the most vulnerable populations, offering affordable education where no other options exist. With the stricter enforcement of regulations under the new reforms, these schools may eventually have to close if they fail to meet the required standards.

This poses a serious challenge for rural communities where government schools are often distant, overcrowded, or underperforming.

## Dugawar : Construction Expanding to Serve All

While the policy recommends a student-teacher ratio of 35:1, the reality in many rural areas is quite different. Our classrooms, like those in much of rural India, often have 50 or more students. This is not out of choice, but necessity. In regions where access to quality education is limited, families travel long distances and seek admission at *St. Anthony's School*, creating an overwhelming demand. Now, with the new policy, we face a tough challenge: reducing class sizes will mean refusing admission to many deserving children. Even to continue accommodating all 2,250 currently enrolled students required more classrooms.

The second floor of one wing of the main building had remained incomplete. To meet these new requirements, we have begun constructing additional classrooms on this floor. With its completion, we will gain 10 additional classrooms, allowing us to steadily move toward compliance standards. Construction work started as soon as the school closed for the summer vacation, at the end of April, to minimize disruption when classes resume in July. This careful scheduling ensures that students' learning remains uninterrupted while allowing the work to proceed efficiently. This final phase of expansion at the *Dugawar* campus will help us meet infrastructure norms and accommodate future growth. The timing is critical as we are preparing for government infrastructure audits and the renewal of *St. Anthony's Dugawar* Affiliation in 2027.



The construction of the second floor of our main building in *Dugawar* is going on. That work was pending for many years.

The board exam results were announced in May and were satisfactory. The hard work of our staff and students paid off with good results. In India, academic competition is intense. Children are often highly motivated — and sometimes under pressure — to work extremely hard in what can feel like a true survival of the fittest. Recognizing this, our school strives to create a balanced environment, offering both academic support and extracurricular activities to foster students' well-being. Yet, some outstanding students manage to balance their studies with leisure and personal interests.

*Jiya* is one such remarkable example. A passionate reader of thrillers, a music lover, and a devoted fan of the South Korean



boy band BTS, she has also excelled academically. Her favorite subjects are Science and Computer Studies, in which she achieved a perfect score of 100% in her Class X Board exams! She stood third among the toppers of the year, scoring 98% overall.

Jiya joined St. Anthony's School at the age of 4 through our sponsorship program. Like many others supported through this program, she received the opportunity to access quality education that would have otherwise been out of reach. Thanks to the supportive environment provided by both her school and her family, she was able to fully develop her potential. We are proud of her achievements and excited for what the future holds.



Jiya joined St. Anthony's School 12 years ago.

spread, especially among the poor, rural populations, and youth. Each year, 1.35 million Indians die from tobacco-related illnesses such as cancer, heart disease, and respiratory problems.

Tobacco use in India extends far beyond cigarettes. Products like *bidis* (hand-rolled cigarettes), chewing tobacco, *gutka*, and *paan masala* are inexpensive, easily accessible, and aggressively marketed, particularly to low-income groups. The low cost of these products, often sold

in small, affordable sachets, makes them particularly attractive to young people and daily laborers with limited income.

At St. Anthony's School, we sometimes encounter children addicted to *gutka*, some even distributing it to friends. Helping them quit is a challenging and ongoing process. Many children in the project area start using *gutka* at a very young age.

When visiting government offices, it is common to see building corners stained red from people spitting chewing tobacco and *paan masala*. Although some progress has

## The Tobacco Crisis in India

India is the second-largest consumer of tobacco globally, with 267 million users. While many developed countries report declining tobacco use, in India it remains wide-



Rallies are conducted in the nearby villages by our students to denounce the dangers of tobacco.



Small shops like this one are everywhere in India. The small bags hanging on the right are *paan massala* (chewing tobacco).

been made, tobacco products remain readily available in village shops.

The government has introduced several measures such as graphic health warnings on packaging, public smoking bans, and *gutka* bans in certain states. However, enforcement is inconsistent. The continued social acceptance and the easy availability of illicit tobacco products hinder meaningful progress.

In recent years, India has also adopted innovative public awareness strategies. One of the most visible is the mandatory inclusion of anti-tobacco messages in movies and television shows. Whenever smoking or tobacco use is depicted on screen, a health warning appears in real-time, and additional public health advertisements are shown before the start of films in cinemas. These measures aim to reach a wide and diverse audience, particularly the youth who are often influenced by celebrities and film stars. Bollywood, being a major cultural force, plays an unintended role in shaping behaviors, making these interventions critically important.

The economic burden of tobacco use in India is enormous. According to estimates, tobacco-related diseases cost the country around 22.4 billion

dollars annually in healthcare expenses and productivity losses. This financial strain affects not only the national economy but also individual families, especially in rural areas where income levels are already low.

Tobacco cultivation itself is a major industry in India, employing millions of people, particularly in states like *Andhra Pradesh*, *Karnataka*, *Telangana*, and *Gujarat*. While much of the production is legal and regulated under government oversight, a significant portion also fuels the unorganized sector, including illegal manufacturing units that produce unregistered *bidis* and chewing tobacco without

health warnings or proper quality controls. This illegal sector undermines government efforts and makes tobacco products even more accessible and dangerous.

Despite school campaigns, healthcare initiatives, and media interventions, achieving the national target of reducing tobacco use by 30% by 2025 seems unlikely without stronger and more coordinated action at all levels. Community involvement, stricter law enforcement, better support for cessation programs, and continuous education are essential to combat this deeply rooted public health crisis.

