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One Nation, One Test, Many Casualties: Tamil Nadu's Decade-Long Struggle against NEET in India

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Abstract-- The National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) has been one of the most contested education policy issues in Tamil Nadu since its nationwide enforcement in 2017. This article traces the legal, political, constitutional trajectory of Tamil Nadu's resistance to NEET — from the early exemption efforts under the late Chief Minister Kalamannan M. Karunanidhi, through the 2017 Supreme Court reversal that withdrew the state's exemption, to the sustained legislative and judicial campaign led by Former Chief Minister M.K. Stalin. Drawing on the findings of the Justice A.K. Rajan Committee (2021), Assembly resolutions, and the Tamil Nadu government's Article 131 suit before the Supreme Court, the article examines claims that NEET has disproportionately disadvantaged rural, Tamil-medium, and first-generation students, entrenched a costly private coaching industry, flaw in NTA exam through offline, online/technology mode and coincided with a series of student suicides. The paper situates these developments within the Dravidian model of governance — a framework of social justice, rationalism, and inclusive welfare — and within the broader constitutional debate on education as a subject under the Concurrent List. The article also presents, for balance, the principal counter-arguments. The article is intended as a research-based contribution to ongoing public and academic discourse rather than as a definitive legal or political verdict.

Keywords-- NEET, Tamil Nadu, educational federalism, A.K. Rajan Committee, medical admissions, Article 131, social justice, Concurrent List, student suicides, coaching industry

I. INTRODUCTION

Medical education admission policy in India has, for over a decade, been the site of one of the country's sharpest Centre-State disagreements. At the centre of this disagreement sits the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test, a single, centrally administered examination that determines admission to undergraduate medical, dental, and allied health courses across India. For most states, NEET's introduction was procedurally uneventful. For Tamil Nadu, it has been the subject of nine years of continuous legislative resolutions, one Presidential reference, multiple committee reports, several rounds of Supreme Court litigation, and — most tragically — a string of student suicides that have kept the issue at the emotional centre of the state's public life.

This article examines why Tamil Nadu's opposition to NEET has been unusually sustained and institutionally comprehensive compared to other states, what evidence the state government has placed before courts and the public to justify exemption, and how the ruling Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam has framed the issue as part of a larger "Dravidian model" of governance rooted in social justice and rationalism. It also examines the constitutional architecture within which this dispute unfolds — namely, the position of "education" in the Concurrent List of the Constitution since 1976 rather than in the exclusive State List, which is central to why Tamil Nadu's exemption bills require Presidential assent.

The article does not purport to adjudicate the underlying legal dispute, which remains sub judice before the Supreme Court of India. Instead, it aims to lay out, in a structured research format, the historical record, the empirical claims made by state authorities and committees, and the principal arguments on both sides, so that the debate can be understood in its full institutional and human context.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

2.1 Government and Committee-Level Literature

The single most cited primary source in this field is the Report of the High-Level Committee to Study the Impact of NEET on Medical Admissions in Tamil Nadu (Justice A.K. Rajan, Chairman), submitted to the Tamil Nadu government in 2021. Structured across thirteen chapters covering the history of NEET, its academic merits and validity, its impact on admissions from academic, socio-economic and health-service perspectives, and constitutional provisions relating to education, the report remains the most comprehensive state-commissioned document on the subject. Later citations of the report's statistics show that the share of rural students in Tamil Nadu's government medical colleges fell from 61.45 percent to 50.81 percent after NEET's introduction, while the share of Tamil-medium students collapsed from 14.88 percent to just 1.99 percent, with English-medium representation correspondingly rising to 98.01 percent.



A committee member, former Vice-Chancellor Jawahar Nesan, further argued in public commentary that NEET lacks "academic validity" because the national examination is based on a CBSE syllabus followed by only a fraction of Indian students, and warned that the profile of students the exam selects is making it harder for rural public health centres and district hospitals to recruit doctors and specialists.

This Body Of Literature Is Significant Because It Is Simultaneously A Policy Document And A Piece Of Contested Empirical Research — It Has Been Treated By The State Government As An Evidentiary Foundation For Legislation And Litigation, And Has Been Repeatedly Invoked In Assembly Debates And Court Filings.

2.2 Socio-Economic and Statistical Commentary Literature

A distinct body of applied policy commentary focuses on quantifying NEET's distributive effects. This literature has proposed remedial measures such as state-funded scholarships, free study material, and upgraded government schools for rural and Tamil-medium students, alongside expansion of medical college capacity, noting that Tamil Nadu's 38 government and 39 private medical institutions are, in this view, too few for a state with a population of roughly 72 million. This strand tends to accept the core statistical claims about declining rural/Tamil-medium representation while arguing for supply-side and support-based remedies (more seats, more coaching access) as an alternative or complement to outright exemption — a materially different policy conclusion from the committee-report literature reviewed in 2.1, even though both draw on similar underlying data.

Parliamentary-debate literature adds a further layer, capturing cross-party legislative arguments made inside Parliament itself. Rajya Sabha proceedings from 2017 record AIADMK and DMK members jointly arguing for exemption, including a claim by an AIADMK member that differential question-paper difficulty disadvantaged Tamil Nadu students relative to northern states, and warnings from multiple parties that students were being driven to the "verge of committing suicide" over the exam. Subsequent Rajya Sabha commentary from 2022 catalogued specific integrity concerns — scandal, impersonation, paper leaks, and evaluation corruption in NEET examinations — as part of the case that the test's credibility, not merely its socio-economic impact, undermines its claim to be a fair national standard.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. *To trace the historical trajectory* of Tamil Nadu's opposition to NEET — from the state's early exemption efforts under Chief Ministers Kalamangal M. Karunanidhi through the judiciary 2016 exemption and its reversal in 2017, to the present day.
2. *To examine the legal and constitutional journey* of the NEET exemption bills, including the Justice A.K. Rajan Committee (2021), the Tamil Nadu Admission to Undergraduate Medical Degree Courses Bill, the Article 131 suit before the Supreme Court, and the 2025 withholding of Presidential assent.
3. *To critically evaluate the empirical claims* advanced by the A.K. Rajan Committee regarding NEET's impact on rural, Tamil-medium, and first-generation students' access to medical education, while also recording the documented criticisms of the Committee's data and methodology.
4. *To document the human cost of the NEET controversy*, particularly the reported student suicides linked to examination-related distress, and to assess how this has shaped public sentiment and cross-party political consensus in Tamil Nadu.
5. *To analyse the Dravidian model of governance* as the ideological framework within which the DMK government has situated its NEET opposition, and to examine how principles of social justice, equality, and rationalism have been applied to this specific policy demand.
6. *To assess the federalism dimension of the dispute*, specifically the constitutional placement of education in the Concurrent List since the 42nd Amendment (1976), and the resulting demand to restore it to the State List or create a Special Concurrent List.
7. *To situate Tamil Nadu's experience in comparative perspective*, by examining the extent to which other Indian states (Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Karnataka) have raised similar concerns about NEET, and why none has pursued exemption with comparable persistence.
8. *To draw an evidence-based conclusion* on the current constitutional and political status of the dispute, without prejudging its pending adjudication before the Supreme Court of India, and to identify areas requiring further independent research.



IV. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: FROM PROPOSAL TO NATIONWIDE ENFORCEMENT

4.1 Origins of NEET

NEET was first conducted in 2013 as a move to replace the multiplicity of state and institutional entrance examinations with a single national test. The Supreme Court initially struck down the new system as unconstitutional in July 2013, though a five-judge constitutional bench later upheld the conduct of NEET for filling medical college seats.

4.2 Tamil Nadu's Early Exemption Efforts

Tamil Nadu's engagement with the NEET question dates back to around 2010–2011, when the demand for exemption first surfaced under Chief Minister Kalaaignar M. Karunanidhi. This phase remained largely at the level of political demand and representation; NEET had not yet been implemented, no bill had been passed, and no court had yet ruled on the matter. NEET was first conceived and conducted in 2013 as a move to replace the multiplicity of state and institutional entrance examinations with a single national test. The Supreme Court initially struck down the new system as unconstitutional in July 2013, Then Chief Minister J. Jayalalithaa wrote to the Union Government seeking exemption for the state, and repeated this request after the change in central government in 2014. These efforts, alongside similar requests from other states, led to a temporary reprieve: Tamil Nadu, along with some other states, secured exemption from NEET in 2016. That exemption, however, applied only to the government quota of seats for the 2016–17 academic year; NEET continued to apply to management quota admissions in the same period.

4.3 The 2017 Reversal

It was only in 2017 that NEET was first actually held for admissions in Tamil Nadu by consequence of the organization Sankalp Charitable Trust filed a public interest litigation asking the Supreme Court to direct the central authorities to conduct NEET uniformly across all states without exceptions, On August 22, 2017, the Supreme Court directed the Tamil Nadu government to conduct medical admissions solely based on NEET scores after the central government clarified it was not pursuing an ordinance to exempt the state. — an accurate characterization of the practical outcome, even though the reversal came through litigation and the ordinance not being carried through, rather than through a single reported "cancellation" order.

Since 2017, every academic year has seen NEET applied uniformly to admissions in Tamil Nadu, even as the state legislature and successive governments have continued to seek an exit route.

V. THE LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL JOURNEY, 2017–2026

5.1 The A.K. Rajan Committee (2021)

Following the DMK's return to power in 2021, Chief Minister M.K. Stalin constituted a nine-member high-level committee chaired by retired Madras High Court judge Justice A.K. Rajan to study the impact of NEET on students from socially disadvantaged sections, inviting public suggestions before submitting its findings within a month. The committee received roughly 87,000 public representations, a majority of which favoured discontinuing NEET in favour of Class 12 marks as the basis for medical admission.

The 165-page report was submitted to the Chief Minister in July 2021. Its central empirical claims included:

- A decline in the share of applicants from Tamil Nadu State Board schools securing MBBS admissions, from roughly 95 percent in the pre-NEET period to about 64.27 percent by 2020–21.
- A widening gap between English-medium and Tamil-medium students' representation in government medical colleges — Tamil-medium students' average share reportedly falling sharply in the post-NEET period compared to English-medium students, whose share rose.
- A warning that continued reliance on NEET could leave rural primary health centres and government hospitals short of doctors, with rural and urban poor students effectively excluded from medical courses.
- A recommendation that Higher Secondary examination marks, with a scientific system of normalisation across boards, should be the sole criterion for admission to first-degree medical programmes.

It is important to record, in the interest of research balance, that the report's methodology was publicly contested. Critics, including some academics, argued that the report relied on selective data and unverified claims — for instance, a cited figure that 99 percent of NEET-qualified students had undergone private coaching was questioned for lacking a disclosed survey methodology. This methodological controversy is itself part of the historical record of the debate and is treated in Section 8 below.



5.2 Legislative Attempts And Presidential Assent

The Tamil Nadu Assembly has repeatedly passed legislation to exempt the state from NEET:

- In September 2021, the Assembly passed the Tamil Nadu Admission to Undergraduate Medical Degree Courses Bill, seeking permanent exemption for state students from NEET, following the Rajan Committee report and a series of student suicides.
- The bill was re-enacted by the Assembly in February 2022 after Governor R.N. Ravi returned it, and remained pending before the Union Government from May 2022.
- The state government also filed an original suit under Article 131 of the Constitution, arguing that making NEET the sole gateway to medical education violates the basic structure of the Constitution and the fundamental right to equality, given its disproportionate impact on rural and Tamil-medium students.
- On 4 March 2025, the Governor's Secretariat conveyed that the President of India had withheld assent to the Bill. Tamil Nadu characterized this as a mechanical decision taken without assigning reasons, despite the state having responded in detail to objections raised by the Ministries of Health, Education, and AYUSH, and moved the Supreme Court again, describing the withholding of assent as unconstitutional and a serious violation of Centre-State relations.

5.3 The Article 131 Suit And Its Arguments

The state's suit contends that NEET, by favouring affluent urban students able to afford years of private coaching, has tilted admissions towards repeat test-takers and undermine the equality guarantees of Articles 14 and 15(4) of the Constitution, resulting in systematic exclusion of first-generation learners. The plaint also points to the growth of an expensive coaching industry alongside reported instances of impersonation and alleged question-paper leaks, to question NEET's overall credibility as a fair, standardized instrument. Government data cited in the litigation indicates that more than 70 percent of MBBS admissions secured in Tamil Nadu after NEET's introduction have gone to "repeater" candidates — those attempting the exam more than once — while first-generation learners from government schools have been largely squeezed out. The suit also draws on Supreme Court precedents such as Pradeep Jain and Neil Aurelio Nunes to argue that merit in medical admissions cannot be reduced to performance in a single entrance test.

In April 2025, an all-party legislature meeting chaired by Chief Minister M.K. Stalin resolved unanimously to continue the legal struggle for exemption, including filing a fresh Supreme Court case if necessary, following the President's decision. A resolution moved by Deputy Chief Minister Udhayanidhi Stalin committed the state to pursuing "all necessary legal steps" in consultation with legal experts.

5.4 A Note On The Governor's Role

Part of the broader institutional friction concerns the office of the Governor. Earlier in 2025, the Supreme Court delivered a ruling concerning delays by Governor R.N. Ravi in acting on state bills, which the Tamil Nadu government has also cited in its ongoing litigation over the NEET exemption bill. This dimension situates the NEET dispute within a wider pattern of Centre-State and Governor-State Government friction that has characterised Tamil Nadu's recent constitutional politics.

VI. THE HUMAN COST: STUDENT SUICIDES AND THE EMOTIVE DIMENSION

No account of Tamil Nadu's opposition to NEET is complete without acknowledging its human toll. Even by 2021, thirteen students in Tamil Nadu were reported to have taken their lives out of fear of the examination or after failing to clear it. By later assessments, more than two dozen such deaths were recorded over roughly five years. Individual incidents — including two closely reported suicides that reignited the debate in 2023 — have repeatedly reopened the political and public conversation around NEET's psychological burden on aspirants.

These deaths have functioned, in Tamil Nadu's public discourse, as more than statistics: they have become a moral argument in themselves, cited by the state government, opposition parties, and civil society organisations alike as evidence that the current admission architecture imposes a disproportionate psychological cost on students from certain social and linguistic backgrounds. Even the principal opposition party in the state, the AIADMK, has publicly supported the demand to scrap NEET, indicating a rare degree of cross-party consensus on the issue within Tamil Nadu, whatever disagreements exist over which government first raised the demand.

Any responsible research treatment of this dimension should avoid reducing suicide to a single monocausal explanation; multiple factors, including family and social pressure, almost certainly interact with examination-related stress.



What can be said with more confidence is that the *perception* of NEET as an unfair or high-stakes gatekeeping mechanism has become deeply embedded in Tamil Nadu's public consciousness, and that this perception itself carries policy weight regardless of how the underlying causal questions are ultimately resolved.

VII. THE DRAVIDIAN MODEL: GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK BEHIND THE OPPOSITION

7.1 Ideological Roots

The DMK government under M.K. Stalin has consistently framed its NEET opposition not as an isolated grievance but as an application of what it terms the "Dravidian model" of governance. Stalin has described the core values of this model as humanism and social justice, stressing that growth should not be measured only in economic terms but should also translate into social progress, including in areas such as health and education. The model is presented as resting on principles of social justice, equality, and rationalism, with a particular emphasis on the upliftment of marginalized communities, women, youth, and economically weaker sections through expanded reservation policies and welfare schemes.

The Chief Minister has traced the ideological lineage of this model back roughly a century, to the Justice Party and its co-founder Sir Pitty Theagarayar, describing the Dravidian model as "inclusive governance aimed at overall development." Within this lineage, opposition to NEET is presented by the state government not as parochial obstruction but as a contemporary expression of a century-old regional commitment to social equity, anti-elitism in access to education, and rationalist skepticism toward centralized, one-size-fits-all policy instruments.

7.2 Applying The Model To NEET

Under this framework, the state's argument runs as follows: a single centralized examination, administered in a manner that rewards long-duration private coaching, structurally privileges urban, English-medium, and economically better-off aspirants — the very inversion of the social justice commitments the Dravidian model claims as its foundation. The government's own submissions frame the "introduction and continuance of the NEET exam" as having "adversely affected the students in the State of Tamil Nadu, in particular students from rural areas and students from Tamil Nadu State Board of Education affiliated schools." The demand for exemption is thus presented as a defense of the state's historic reservation and welfare architecture against dilution by a centrally imposed, examination-based filter.

7.3 Institutional Efforts Beyond The Judiciary

Consistent with this governance philosophy, Tamil Nadu's campaign against NEET has not been confined to the courts. It has included Assembly resolutions passed with rare cross-party support, the constitution of an expert judicial committee (A.K. Rajan), public consultation exercises, representations to the Governor's office and to the President of India, and continuous political mobilization by successive Chief Ministers — first Kalaignar Karunanidhi's initial exemption push, and subsequently M.K. Stalin's sustained legislative and legal campaign. This multi-institutional character — using legislative, executive, judicial, and consultative channels simultaneously — is itself often cited by state officials as evidence of the depth and legitimacy of the demand, rather than a matter of surface-level political messaging.

VIII. THE FEDERALISM QUESTION: EDUCATION, THE CONCURRENT LIST, AND STATE AUTONOMY

A precise constitutional point deserves clarification for research accuracy. Education was originally placed in the State List (List II) under the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution. Following the 42nd Constitutional Amendment of 1976, however, "education, including technical education, medical education and universities" was moved to the Concurrent List (List III), where both Parliament and state legislatures may legislate, but central law prevails in case of conflict, and any state bill that is repugnant to central law requires Presidential assent to take effect.

This is precisely the constitutional bottleneck Tamil Nadu has encountered: its exemption bills, passed unanimously by the state Assembly, cannot become law without Presidential assent, because they seek to override a central examination framework in a Concurrent List subject. The demand — sometimes voiced in Tamil Nadu's political discourse, including by the present author — that education be returned wholly to the State List, or that Tamil Nadu specifically be granted the freedom to legislate autonomously in this field, is therefore best understood as a demand to reverse or work around the 1976 amendment's centralizing effect, not simply a request for an administrative exemption.

Proponents frame this as a matter of cooperative and asymmetric federalism: a large, linguistically distinct state with its own well-established school board, decades of reservation policy, and a functioning medical education system should retain primary control over admission criteria to its own institutions.



Critics of this framing, discussed in the next section, argue that education policy — like public health — has legitimate national dimensions (portability of medical qualifications, common minimum standards, national manpower planning) that justify a Concurrent, rather than exclusively State, subject status.

IX. COMPARATIVE STATE EXPERIENCE

Tamil Nadu's position, while distinctive in its intensity and institutional persistence, has not been entirely isolated. Other states — including Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, and Karnataka — have at various points also voiced opposition to aspects of NEET's implementation, indicating that concerns about the exam's socio-economic effects are not confined to Tamil Nadu alone, even though no other state has pursued exemption with comparable legislative and judicial persistence. This comparative dimension strengthens the state's argument that its concerns reflect a genuine structural issue with the examination's design, even as it also raises the question of why other states, facing similar concerns, have not pursued the same exemption route to the same degree — a question that itself invites further comparative research.

X. CONCLUSION

Tamil Nadu's engagement with NEET since 2010 — spanning the exemption efforts initiated under Kalaignar M. Karunanidhi, the 2016 exemption and its 2017 reversal, the A.K. Rajan Committee's findings, repeated unanimous Assembly resolutions, and the sustained Article 131 litigation pursued under M.K. Stalin — represents one of the most institutionally comprehensive state-level challenges to a central education policy in India's recent history. The state's case rests on empirical claims about declining rural and Tamil-medium representation in medical admissions, the entrenchment of a coaching-driven advantage for repeat test-takers, and a painful record of student suicides that has given the issue an urgency rarely seen in ordinary policy disputes.

The Dravidian model of governance provides the ideological scaffolding within which the state government situates this demand, framing it as a defence of social justice and inclusive access against what it characterises as a centralising, examination-based filter.

At the same time, a fair research account must record that the underlying statistical claims have been contested, that the pre-NEET system had its own acknowledged weaknesses, and that the matter remains constitutionally and legally unresolved, with the Supreme Court of India yet to deliver a final verdict on the Article 131 suit and the President's withholding of assent. What can be stated with confidence is that the dispute exposes a genuine and unresolved tension in India's federal structure — between the constitutional logic of a Concurrent education list designed for national standardisation, and the lived, documented experience of a state that regards a uniform national test as incompatible with its own historical commitments to social justice and educational access. Resolving that tension, whether through judicial pronouncement, legislative compromise, or a negotiated Centre-State settlement, will likely remain one of the defining education-policy questions of Tamil Nadu's, and India's, coming years.

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