

Challenges in Education and Sustainability of Government

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Abstract

Since Independence, successive Indian governments have had to address a number of key challenges with regard to education policy, which has always formed a crucial part of its development agenda. Improving the standards of education in India will be a critical test for the current government. It will need to resolve concerns over the content of the curriculum, as well as tackling the underlying challenges to education.

Introduction: India's education system turns out millions of graduates each year, many skilled in IT and engineering. This manpower advantage underpins India's recent economic advances, but masks deep seated problems within India's education system. While India's demographics are generally perceived to give it an edge over other countries' economies (India will have a youthful population when other countries have ageing populations), if this advantage is restricted to a small, highly educated elite, the domestic political ramifications could be severe. With 35 per cent of the population under the age of 15, India's education system faces numerous challenges. Successive governments have pledged to increase spending on education to 6 per cent of GDP, but actual spending has hovered around 4 per cent for the last few years. While, at the top end, India's business schools, Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) and universities produce globally competitive graduates, primary and secondary schools, particularly in rural areas, struggle to find staff.

Indian governments have seen education as a crucial development tool. The first part of this paper provides a historical perspective on the development of the education system in India, highlighting the changing emphases within government policy. Since Independence, the education policies of successive governments have built on the substantial legacies of the Nehruvian period, targeting the core themes of plurality and secularism, with a focus on excellence in higher education, and inclusiveness at all levels. In reaching these goals, the issue of funding has become problematic; governments have promised to increase state spending while realizing the economic potential of bringing in private-sector financial support.

The second part of this paper examines how recent governments have responded to these challenges, which have remained largely unchanged since Nehru's era, despite the efforts of past governments and commissions to reform the Indian education system. Attention will be paid to more recent policy initiatives, both those of the previous BJP-led administration and the proposals of the current Congress-led United Progressive Alliance. It will become clear that the same difficulties that existed nearly sixty years ago remain largely unsolved today – for example, the need to safeguard access to education for the poorest and most disenfranchised communities of India.

The Evolution of India's Education Policy: Traditional Hindu education served the needs of Brahmin families: Brahmin teachers would teach boys to read and write. Under the Moguls, education was similarly elitist, favoring the rich rather than those from high-caste backgrounds. These pre-existing elitist tendencies were reinforced under British rule. British colonial rule

brought with it the concept of a modern state, a modern economy and a modern education system. The education system was first developed in the three presidencies (Bombay, Calcutta and Madras). By linking entrance and advancement in government service to academic education, colonial rule contributed to the legacy of an education system geared to preserving the position and prerogatives of the more privileged. In the early 1900s, the Indian National Congress called for national education, placing an emphasis on technical and vocational training. In 1920 Congress initiated a boycott of government-aided and government-controlled schools and founded several 'national' schools and colleges. These failed, as the rewards of British-style education were so great that the boycott was largely ignored. Local elites benefited from the British education system and eventually used it to expel the colonizers. Nehru envisaged India as a secular democracy with a state-led command economy. Education for all and industrial development were seen as crucial tools to unite a country divided on the basis of wealth, caste and religion, and formed the cornerstones of the anti imperial struggle. Following Independence, school curricula were thus imbued with the twin themes of inclusiveness and national pride, placing emphasis on the fact that India's different communities could live peacefully side by side as one nation. The legacies of this Nehruvian approach to education are considerable; perhaps most notable is the entrenchment of the pluralist/secularist perspective in the minds of the Indian people. Subsidized quality higher education through institutions such as the IITs and IIMs formed a major contribution to the Nehruvian vision of a self-reliant and modern Indian state, and they now rank amongst the best higher education institutions in the world. In addition, policies of positive discrimination in education and employment furthered the case for access by hitherto unprivileged social groups to quality education. It has been argued that while access for some marginalized communities continues to be limited the upward mobility of a few Dalit and tribal households resulting from positive discrimination in educational institutions and state patronage has created role models that help democracy survive in India.

Current Challenges and Proposals: Despite efforts to incorporate all sections of the population into the Indian education system, through mechanisms such as positive discrimination and non formal education, large numbers of young people are still without schooling. Although enrolment in primary education has increased, it is estimated that at least 35 million, and possibly as many as 60 million, children aged 6–14 years are not in school. Severe gender, regional, and caste disparities also exist. The main problems are the high drop-out rate, especially after Class 10, low levels of learning and achievement, inadequate school infrastructure, poorly functioning schools, high teacher absenteeism, the large number of teacher vacancies, poor quality of education and inadequate funds. Other groups of children 'at risk', such as orphans, child-laborers, street children and victims of riots and natural disasters, do not necessarily have access to schools.¹⁰ Furthermore, there is no common school system; instead children are channeled into private, government-aided and government schools on the basis of ability to pay and social class. At the top end are English-language schools affiliated to the upscale CBSE (Central Board of Secondary Education), CISCE (Council for the Indian Schools Certificates Examination) and IB (International Baccalaureate) examination boards, offering globally recognized syllabuses and curricula. Those who cannot afford private schooling attend English-language government-aided schools, affiliated to state-level examination boards. And on the bottom rung are poorly managed governments or municipal schools, which cater for the children of the poor majority. Therefore, while education for all is safeguarded by the Constitution, and a majority of people can now access educational resources, the quality of the education that young

people in Indian receive varies widely according to their means and background, which is a worrying and problematic trend. In India's 600,000 villages and multiplying urban slum habitats, 'free and compulsory education' is in fact basic literacy instruction dispensed by barely qualified 'Para teachers'.¹¹ The thrust on elementary education over the last two decades and the growing aspirations of poor communities resulting from their participation in a political democracy have already led to a situation where most children at age six are enrolling in schools/learning centers and residential bridge courses.

However, the poor quality of these schools and their rudimentary physical and human infrastructure often lead to children dropping out of the school system without learning or continuing in it with limited learning. An emphasis on food, livelihood and health guarantees is therefore simultaneously required to level out the initial disadvantages of the poor in the educational sphere stemming from malnourishment, poverty, and health-related debility. The present Indian government, the United Progressive Alliance, appears to be committed to confronting these challenges, as reflected in their Common Minimum Programme (see below). The introduction of a 2 per cent education cess (surcharge) on tax, a stress on employment guarantees and the establishment of a National Rural Health Mission are thus welcome developments in this respect. India's aim of providing basic education for all stems from the empowering and redistributive impact of education. Until recently, literacy, and the related issue of access to schooling, has taken precedence over curricular content. J. Dreze and A. Sen argue: Literacy is an essential tool for self-defense in a society where social interactions include the written media. An illiterate person is significantly less equipped to defend herself in court, to obtain a bank loan, to enforce inheritance rights, to take advantage of new technology, to compete for secure employment, to get onto the right bus, to take part in political activity – in short, to participate successfully in the modern economy and society. Dreze and Sen argue that the 1991 census indicated that about half of the adult populations were unable to read or write. Unsurprisingly, literacy rates vary widely between states, and between genders. The northern Hindi-belt states, whose economic performance has been worse than that of western and southern states, have lower literacy rates. Female literacy varies from around 34 per cent in Bihar to 88 per cent in Kerala; male literacy varies between 60 per cent in Bihar and 94 per cent in Kerala. Rajasthan suffers the widest gender difference: female literacy stands at 44 per cent; male at 77 per cent. One of the main aims of education policy in the 1990s was to accelerate the progress of literacy and school attendance and to create an equitable system for girls, as had been planned by the Kothari Commission in 1964.

In recent years, however, attention has shifted away from the provision of basic literacy skills and towards debates surrounding the content of school curricula.

Conclusion: The educational changes introduced by the BJP did not play a major role in the May 2004 general election. While access to education was an issue in some rural areas, roads, power, water and jobs were more important. The NDA manifesto on education had changed in emphasis, moving towards a more 'communal' and nationalistic stand.

While the Congress-dominated United Progressive Alliance government remains in power, these policies will not be implemented. But education will remain a key issue in Indian politics. The government will have to deal with the inherent problems in the education system and, for its own long-term political survival; it will need to reverse the changes introduced by the NDA. As mentioned above, in its Common Minimum Programme, announced on 28 May 2004, the government pledged to raise public spending on education to at least 6 per cent of GDP, impose a cess on all central taxes to 'universalize access to quality basic education' and reverse the

creeping communalization of school syllabuses of the past five years. Both the budget and the Independence Day address stressed the importance of education as a key to tackling poverty, one of the main causes of which is illiteracy. The president, Abdul Kalam, has called for expenditure on education to be raised by 2–3 per cent of GDP. The government has already experienced a number of criticisms from its parliamentary opponents. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) criticized the UPA's moves on textbook reform for 'falling short of what the new government has incorporated in the Common Minimum Programme in its section on education'. It also looks as if relations between the central and state governments will remain strained. In August 2004 the BBC reported that ministers from five BJP-run states walked out of a meeting called by the government to devise a new national education policy. Moves to de secularize Indian education under the previous government were, in part, an attempt to strengthen the BJP's future voter-base. But they also stemmed from a widespread recognition that India's education system fails large numbers of its young people, either because education is not available or because it does not provide students with relevant skills. The Common Minimum Programme represents a welcome attempt to reassert the traditional vision of education in India, concentrating on access, quality and secularism. But while these aims have remained largely unchanged since Nehru's era, it remains to be seen whether the current government can become the first administration to confront and manage the balance between excellence and equity.

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