

**Debdas Banerjee, *India's Education Paradox: National Policies and Regional Insights*, 2024, 301 pp., ₹1,610, Orient BlackSwan Private Limited. ISBN: 978-93-5442-866-1 (hardback).**

DOI: 10.1177/00380229261450348

This book excels as a rigorous, data-driven critique of the Indian education system's fundamental policy paradox. It presents a compilation of data on the evaluation of policies and reforms from various educational contexts across the nation, providing a comprehensive perspective on the scenario of educational development in conjunction with developments in other social institutions. It also reflects on the principles and practices of educational policies in India. The author clearly portrays India's educational paradox by explaining the fundamental concerns of growing educational inequalities and falling educational standards, which result in huge imbalances in educational outcomes. The author attempts to explain why the two post-education commissions (1964–1966 and 1986) and the National Educational Policy 2020 (henceforth, NEP 2020; MHRD 2020), which reassure the restructuring of the Indian education system, have not yet enabled the Government of India to tackle the growing inequalities in various forms. Readers will encounter a work that necessitates an examination of thoughtless application and adoption of market-oriented policies in education, as opposed to multicultural, context-specific learning in India. Inequality in education contributes the most to overall inequality, followed by inequality in life expectancy and income inequality in India (UNDP, 2018). The author expresses concern over the educational inequalities and disparities that are objectively worrying, given that India's performance in gender discrimination, human rights, labour productivity, social justice and technological innovation lags behind that of most countries. The readers are introduced to concepts such as interpersonal inequalities, measured in terms of mean years of schooling, which contribute to interstate disparities in the quality of teaching and learning. The author argues in this work that significant regional disparities exist in India's educational development, as supported by existing survey results.

Chapter 1 outlines a framework for reforms that would play a substantive role in enabling disadvantaged individuals to access education. The concept of education as human capital is introduced, and the impact of a person's formal years of

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schooling on their work quality is explained, emphasising the shift from manual to cognitive abilities of the workforce.

Citing a regional example from the low-income state of Odisha, the author reveals, with the help of relevant data, how variations in per capita public expenditure and investment decisions of individual households can provide insight into the ways and reasons behind regional disparities in educational participation. The author brings in the concept of the principal–agent relationship to rationalise. The author argues that the prevailing regional disparities in educational opportunities warrant urgent institutional decisions to create a level-playing field for all states.

In Chapter 2, the author enlightens readers on the lopsided fiscal allocation to different sectors of education, favouring expansion, and raises a concern about how NEP 2020 (MHRD, 2020) does not adequately address this issue. A pattern of sector-wise government expenditure in education is presented for selected countries to explain why India stands out as an exception. India allocates a disproportionate share of its fiscal resources to higher education, unlike other advanced nations. The author establishes, with reliable data, that a systems approach is needed rather than a sectoral approach. The author reiterates in this seminal work, based on data, that the government of India's approach to educational development is 'expanding up' rather than 'expanding out'. A fascinating and distinctive observation is made by the author on the backpedalling approach adopted by the government of India in dealing with educational underdevelopment in the nation, by projecting the data showing how the union budget on higher education increases every year and decreases on primary education, which is a matter of concern for the nation. This observation has significant policy implications for the nation's educational development.

While the inequalities in education in the nation are mainly dealt with by researchers in education from the perspectives of socio-economic disparities, this book critiques the equality issues with the help of the neo-classical production function, where education is a crucial factor in the aggregate production function to explain economic growth in Chapter 3 on divergent agency behaviour in educational attainment. It is challenging for Indian parents to maintain a balanced level of expenditure due to various institutional arrangements. The author attributes the source of the problem to the supply of inputs and a sluggish labour market, which in turn influences the demand for education. This chapter proposes two factors that warrant closer scrutiny: school life expectancy and student achievement. The factors explaining the high dropout rates at the primary level in all India, despite Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) declining since 2011–2012, are cited as important areas of inquiry.

The disparity in school education development in a few selected states is presented in Chapter 4, on regional variation. To understand the state-wise demand and supply for elementary education, household economic characteristics, learning outcomes, public spending and school-teacher characteristics are studied. The dropout ratio is reportedly higher in Bihar compared to Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra. A lack of interest in education was a significant reason for dropping out in some states, such as Madhya Pradesh. The survey results presented in this chapter provide valuable insights into the direction that school

education reforms should take. Less than one-fifth of the dropouts are not interested in education. If the curriculum is that repulsive, the author suggests it should be made more attractive. The interstate comparisons on learning outcomes reveal that students' learning performance also depends on factors other than physical infrastructure. In this chapter, the author presents a detailed picture of learning outcomes based on ASER (2017) data for various states. A notable observation is that learning gains in government schools have been greater than those in private schools. The author, then, suggests several measures for improving learning outcomes, including remedial teaching.

While the previous chapters empirically verified the deprivations and dropouts, Chapter 5 proposes several solutions for enhancing school attendance and reducing school dropouts by applying the capabilities approach, with a focus on the comparative quality of life and the issue of justice. When a conflicting situation arises between a collective choice and an individual choice, it is the state policy that must decide the rules. In this context, the author expresses concern over the dropout rate of approximately half of the cohort enrolled in class I from the perspective of human development. Assurances from various education commissions to give high priority to ensuring the retention of children at school are cited to reiterate the seriousness of the issue of dropouts. The author, then, goes on to describe several factors that lead to dropouts and lists solid solutions to address the situation. Not being interested in studies, the high cost of education and getting married were the most frequently cited reasons for dropping out of school in rural areas, as explained in the NSSO (2016) and discussed in earlier chapters of this book. The author suggests policy interventions in the areas of school choice, early childhood care and education, English language choice and special education; otherwise, justice would be denied to a larger section of society who cannot exercise their school choices.

Chapter 6 on vocational education offers an in-depth examination of its current state in India, highlighting the elitist attitude and apathy that have hindered its integration into the mainstream education system. A comparison is, then, drawn with EU nations, where the basic education system is used for basic social assistance. However, the author explicitly states that in the context of India, where almost half of the class I cohort drop out by the end of elementary levels, identifying the nature of vocational education and addressing fiscal responsibilities are of prime importance. The author also presents various theoretical perspectives to determine the purpose of vocational education. The book highlights the fact that the supply side of vocational education needs to be synchronised with demand patterns and points out that the reason why vocational education is not successful in the nation is due to a lack of purpose among policymakers. The book proposes practical actions that can complement the recommendations of NEP 2020. The author recommends a mother skill council that trains candidates in both soft skills and domain-specific skills to harness creativity.

The author has logically planned the book, and Chapter 7 on higher education substantiates several key educational problems raised in the earlier chapters. The disproportionalities and dilemmas in higher education need to be immediately addressed by the nation. The author presents a clear picture of the divergence in

GER, which is wide, ranging from 6.1% in Daman and Diu to 75.8% in Sikkim. Citing examples from advanced nations, the author highlights the issue of a lack of focus and expenditure on pre-primary and primary education systems, despite these nations having prioritised their primary education systems and still achieved significant success in higher education. There is evidence that improvements in the primary education system help reduce poverty, rather than the higher education system. The chapter concludes with a heavy critique of the nation's policy of instituting Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) that do not focus on issues of social equity and regional equality.

The concluding chapter recapitulates the disorders in higher education through fiscal possibilities and suggests cooperative federalism as a reform. It examines the budgetary capacities of the disadvantaged states and argues in favour of the Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE), to which all states/UTs must have representation. An education planning commission is suggested, which shall be accountable to the parliament. This chapter runs a discourse on the route to capacity building, which is indicated throughout the work to expand higher education in the nation. Several questions are raised as to empowering minds, upgrading the Indian labour force or placing the Indian higher education on the global map. The author, thus, recommends striking a balance between expansion and participation, while also considering quality concerns. The book suggests having a consolidated fund for higher education as an alternative to fiscal federalism. The book concludes with a clear recommendation to promote cooperative federalism through CABE, aiming to achieve the broader purposes of education through the active cooperation of states.

Findings presented in most parts of this book are based on the theories of economics of education, which are grounded in the economic production model. However, in the context of schooling, where complex teaching and learning processes are of prime importance, and cognitive skills are learned like other commodities, production function theories may not be entirely applicable to explain the declining learning outcomes in the nation. Thus, to identify the factors that impact the quality of teaching and learning, sociological and psychological analyses of institutional structures are crucial in achieving the desired outcomes. However, this book can effectively engage readers in the nuances of debates on equity and equality in the Indian education system. Segregation in education, achievement, labour market entry and wage premiums is all explained using quantitative data. A crucial factor that influences these, the socio-economic background, especially 'caste', has not been a factor of debate. The book argues in favour of establishing an apex body, the Education Planning Commission, to cater to the needs of higher education institutions in the nation and liberalise the dirigiste regime.

## ORCID iD

Sreekala Edannur  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5284-2627>

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**Sreekala Edannur** 

*School of Education, Pondicherry University,  
Pondicherry, India  
sreekala@pondiuni.ac.in*