

State of Indian Education: Paradox or Product of Systemic Neglect?

Social Change

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Debdas Banerjee, *India's Education Paradox: National Policies and Regional Insights*, 2024, 290 pp., Orient BlackSwan. ISBN: 978-93-5442-866-1.

India's post-colonial education journey that began more than seven decades ago has resulted in the creation of a mammoth system of schools and colleges, catering to more than 300 million learners at various stages of education from preschool to university. There are nearly a million and a half schools, with a gross enrolment ratio (GER) that crosses 100 per cent at the elementary stage in most parts of the country. Adult literacy rate, which was a mere 16 per cent in 1951, has risen to around 69.3 per cent according to the 2011 census. Enrolment figures in higher education, which is the second largest in the world, are equally impressive. It is precisely behind this impressive quantitative picture that lies the paradox of Indian education. Despite significant progress, India has the largest number of non-literates in the world; the number of children leaving school without completing even basic education is still staggeringly high; the proportion of children progressing to secondary and higher education remains sluggish despite fast expansion in recent years. Furthermore, annual field assessments by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and the Annual Status of Education Report Centre during the last two decades show that around 50 per cent of children complete primary school without mastering even basic skills of literacy and numeracy. It is apt to wonder if this is a real paradox or it merely signifies the failure of the Indian state to build an effectively functioning system of education. This intriguing picture of Indian education is the subject of this scholarly work by Debdas Banerjee.

School Education: In Search of a New Analytical Framework

Blending theoretical perspectives and empirical data, the book under review attempts to critically examine the numerous problems confronting Indian education. In the introductory chapter, educational inequality is identified as the key factor not only affecting educational progress but also contributing the most to overall inequality in the country. Inequality in Indian education is not a recent

creation. Rather, it is structurally embedded in the system whose origin has to be traced to the colonial period. The Central Advisory Board of Education Report in 1945 (Government of India, 1945) recognised the problem and recommended:

Apart from the extremely slow progress which had been made before the war, the present system does not provide the foundations on which an effective structure could be erected; in fact, much of the present rambling edifice will have to be scrapped in order that something better may be substituted.

But post-colonial India ignored this advice and added even more layers to the unequal hierarchical system inherited from the past. It is true that, during the last seven decades, several policies and programmes have been initiated to improve the system. But as the author points out, ‘improvement is not reform’ (p. 17). In the absence of structural reforms, these efforts have only fortified and accentuated the existing inequality within the system, leading to this apparently paradoxical situation. It is in this background that the author foregrounds Sen’s ‘capabilities approach’ and Rawls’s ‘theory of justice’ for analysing different aspects of the education sector and proposing reforms from a new perspective.

Chapter 2 essentially consists of a theoretical exposition on the nature of education as a public or merit good. The author engages in a fairly long conceptual discourse on education as a public good. The debate on education as a public versus merit good, at least in India, has become quite rhetorical. National policy pronouncements routinely commit to treating education, at least at the basic level, as public good. As has been emphasised in the chapter, constitutional amendment making education a fundamental right and the subsequent enactment of the Right to Education (RTE) Act in 2009 (Government of India, 2009) has unquestionably made elementary schooling a *de jure* public good, as it binds the state to provide free education for all children. But the current state of public schools and the increasing dependence of parents on private education should prompt us to think beyond theoretical discourse and policy pronouncements and even legal guarantees on treating education as a public good. The author presents empirical data on expenditure on education by the Union Government to buttress the argument of inadequate investment in education in India as compared to several other countries.

Reflecting on educational policymaking at the national level, the author is critical of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 (Government of India, 2020) that it is unduly favouring centralisation and market control and is delinked from grassroots realities, and not adequately addressing structural inequalities. Continued disconnect between policy rhetoric and implementation is underscored throughout the book. However, it is doubtful if such extensive reference to recommendations in national policy documents is worthwhile. Even a quick retrospect of national policy statements and their implementation in the Indian context reveals that the government is not bound by the recommendations contained in the national policy, even if endorsed by the parliament or the state legislature. Central and state governments invariably adopt the recommendations selectively, remain silent on most of them, and even reject some altogether without any explanation. Policy rhetoric to spend six per cent of the gross domestic

product on education is one such proposition. Even simpler recommendations have remained unimplemented fully. One such example is the adoption of a $10 + 2 + 3$ structure, which consists of 12 years of schooling followed by 3 years of higher education to obtain the first university degree (NCERT, 1970). Even after nearly six decades, several states have not adopted the principle fully. Another example relates to adopting the mother tongue as the medium of education in the early years of schooling. Every national policy document, including NEP 2020, is quite emphatic on this. But little effort has been made to follow this in letter and spirit. Schools affiliated to the Central Board of Secondary Education, even those fully funded and managed by the Government of India-affiliated schools such as Kendriya Vidyalayas, have routinely flouted the principle with no compunctions. In the Indian context, it is the programmes such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) or Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA), which inherently embody government-endorsed policy, that deserve greater attention for empirical analysis than the rhetorics contained in omnibus policy documents.

Chapter 3 presents an empirical assessment of the current state of school education using familiar indicators such as GER, dropout rate, and mean years of schooling (MYS); computes correlation to poverty based on diverse sources of secondary data. The author highlights some significant points. First, the neoclassical production function approach is unsuitable for analysis, and second, variability across states is so wide that national averages do not permit meaningful conclusions. The chapter concludes with the promise that an alternative analytical framework would be delineated in the subsequent three chapters.

Three chapters (4–6) in the book are devoted to examining reforms in school education. Chapter 4 makes several important observations based on an analysis of inter-regional variations in 11 selected states, which have been classified into four groups (p. 77) based on indicators of poverty, income inequality, and MYS. No explicit rationale has been given for confining the analysis to only 11 states, which restricts the scope for generalisation at the national level. The chapter proposes to consider ‘years of schooling’ as a function (combined effect) of a comprehensive set of variables, internal and external to the school system (p. 78). However, the analysis that follows, based on multiple sources of secondary data, largely consists only of cross-tabulations and graphs giving state-wise averages and percentages. Consequently, structural deficiencies in the system remain unexplored in an interrelated manner and fail to identify the combined effect of different variables as proposed in the model formulated earlier in the chapter.

The author uses the familiar macro metric of education, namely MYS, as the key indicator of education progress. This needs careful consideration. The metric may be reasonably predictive of progress in such areas as income and health, but it is of doubtful validity for representing education progress (Pritchett, 2013). This is particularly so in a system where internal inequality is high, which is the case in India, as pointed out by the author. In a highly fragmented system where nearly 40 per cent of schools are small with less than 100 students enrolled and functioning as de facto single teacher schools, and achievement surveys showing a high level of inter-school variability, MYS is unlikely to give a dependable measure of educational progress. We need a measure that combines the quantity

of education with quality indicators (Filmer et al., 2018), as without combining quality of outcomes of schooling, MYS tends to treat all schools as comparable if not homogenous standard units. This is even more important as the author advocates for adopting the ‘capabilities approach’.

In Chapter 5, under the banner of ‘capabilities approach for school turnouts’, the author discusses a variety of issues, including the RTE Act, Early Childhood Care and Education, and closure and merger of schools. Substantial space is devoted to discussion on English language learning and a section on China’s experience. The contents are largely reflective of opinions not necessarily arising out of any empirical study, nor based on a review of extant scholarly literature on the subject. It is unclear why these topics were chosen under the title of the capabilities approach. While the discussions are interesting and include significant observations, they do not add up to present an alternate paradigm, namely the capabilities approach, nor do they contain any new propositions for radically reforming the education system.

Chapter 6 presents a comparative picture of India with Finland, South Korea, and China with respect to vocational and technical education, highlighting the need for making education more inclusive and skill centric. This is indeed quite pertinent as the school curriculum in India continues to be overly bookish and gives little importance to skill development. Debates on the disconnect between school education and skill development have been a constant feature of curriculum framing in India. Surprisingly, while the author refers to the historical Sneddon–Dewey debate in the United States, there is no mention of the ideas and work of Indian reformers, including Gandhi or the recommendations of the Mudaliar Commission Report (Government of India, 1956) and the National Curriculum Framework of 2005. Reference to the writings of Indian researchers on the issue is also missing. The author makes an untenable connection between the length of the elementary education cycle and skill development, and recommends reviewing the RTE Act and curtailing the length of compulsory schooling. The author’s observations on the need for flexibility in designing school curriculum and greater autonomy for its implementation demand serious consideration. But this is not just a matter that can be addressed fully at the pan-India level. School curriculum in India is not nationally prescribed; every state sets state-specific curriculum and textbooks. However, the need for greater curricular autonomy at the local level for integrating work and education requires serious consideration in each state.

Higher Education: Need for Fiscal Decentralisation and Governance Autonomy

Chapter 7 on higher education begins with a comparative picture of interstate disparities in gross enrolment and specifically points to the skewed pattern of enrolment in different areas of study across selected states. The analysis also highlights a low participation rate despite capacity expansion in recent decades and continued dependence on the affiliated colleges system. The persisting incoherence between the programmes of study pursued and the real-life occupational structure

has significantly impacted the productive capabilities of university graduates. This is at least partly because the University Grants Commission (UGC), which is expected to initiate fundamental reforms to transform the higher education system towards this end, has over the years become primarily the drawing and disbursing office of the Ministry of Education (p. 218). The work of the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) is supposed to complement the work of the UGC in the maintenance of standards and promoting quality. But an expansion of the system does not seem to be guided by considerations of quality, as several private institutions rated as substandard by NAAC have been allowed to offer self-financing courses (p. 199). A major contribution of the chapter is the exposition on the reform processes adopted by China for making higher education programmes more effectively linked to the evolving nature of the economy and social life of the people. This definitely holds a mirror to the struggling and stagnating nature of the Indian higher education system and illuminates possible pathways for progressive reforms. The author is critical of India's policy of investing public resources for building a few world-class institutions while institutions that carry the actual burden of increased enrolment have to struggle with meagre public funding, thereby compelling them to depend on revenue raised from self-financing programmes (p. 241). This approach of creating islands of excellence in the sea of mediocrity is damaging the goals of generating productive human power as well as reducing social and regional inequalities.

The last chapter, titled 'Fiscal Possibilities', discusses a variety of issues related to higher education such as decentralisation, standardisation, flexibility in funding, fiscal federalism, and centre–state relations within the constitutional framework. The author advocates adopting a differential funding framework that takes into consideration the fiscal capacity of different state governments. This reminds us of the proposal made by J. P. Naik, several decades ago, to the federal government to adopt an 'equalization programme' for bridging the inherited gaps in development (Naik, 1963). However, the ground reality with respect to higher education has changed enormously in the intervening decades. As we engage with the issues of decentralisation of governance and financing of education, it is necessary to look beyond the principal–agent relationship of central government–state governments. Even though education is in the concurrent list of the Constitution, in terms of financing, the central government is a relatively minor player shaping the trajectory of educational progress. In school education, state governments bear 90 per cent of public expenditure. Taken on face value, the central government is a major player bearing nearly two-thirds of expenditure on higher education. But we should note that more than half of this goes only to a handful of central institutions such as Indian Institutes of Technology, Indian Institutes of Management, and central universities; meagre resources flow into hundreds of public universities and colleges maintained by state governments. Within different states, with increasing dependence on private self-financing institutions, private entities have become major players determining both the quantity and quality of education. With India firmly embracing a neoliberal policy, it is quite unlikely that the trend is going to be reversed; rather, private players would likely become a more significant force in shaping education development.

In this context, understanding the dynamics of financing and its impact on growth and quality of education in India requires a new paradigm that encompasses not merely public financing but also the current and potentially expanding private financing. Issues of autonomy and accountability, as well as the role of national institutions such as UGC and NAAC, will also have to be reimagined in a new perspective.

Overall Observations

This book is a mixture of hope and despair, just like the education scene in India. The author raises high expectations by beginning each chapter with high sounding theoretical discussion and bold propositions, but the analysis and findings that follow fall short on delineating any new paradigm as claimed initially or arriving at findings that are significantly different from what is already known. There is indeed a substantial body of writings in India on most of the themes, particularly related to school education. But surprisingly, reference to them is missing; engaging with them would have greatly enriched the discussion in the book. Going through the book, one feels that the author has viewed education at a macro level using a narrow economic lens and has consequently missed out on several pedagogic, institutional, and social structural factors critical for a holistic understanding of education. The ‘capability approach’ is put forth as the key paradigm for reforming school education. But the discourse does not move beyond rhetorical repetition into the realm of reordering the system in empirical terms. The author sets forth to delineate an alternate framework for understanding interstate variations in education development (p. 72) and even presents a multivariate model (p. 78). But the analytical tools fail to meet the technical sophistication needed to meet that objective. In short, the analysis of various aspects of education explored in the book has to go deeper and become more comprehensive and interconnected, if we have to unravel the paradox that confronts Indian education.

Notwithstanding the critical observations in the preceding paragraphs, we have to appreciate that the book presents a positive transformative perspective for Indian education. The author rightly advocates for radical shifts in the policy not just incremental changes. Some observations and conclusions on Indian education stand out as we read the book. First, increasing inequality within the education system is contributing to overall inequality in the country, calling for more fundamental reforms. Second, interstate disparities that we inherited from the past have persisted both in terms of quantity and quality. It is necessary to adopt a differential approach in the management of fiscal resources at the national level in order to assist the states to bridge the gap in educational progress. Third, national initiatives such as SSA, Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan, and RUSA, even after implementation for two decades, have failed to significantly address the problem of inequality, nor have they been able to address quality concerns. The situation demands new designs for transferring resources to states in place of centrally sponsored schemes. Fourth, we urgently need reforms that involve genuine decentralisation, empowering local

administrative and institutional leadership; the reforms should cover all aspects—curriculum framing, governance, and management of public resources. Fifth, national statutory bodies like UGC should play an independent and proactive role in the maintenance of quality and standards in higher education instead of merely becoming a promoter of government policies and programmes. The book is definitely a valuable addition to the literature on Indian education. Students would greatly benefit from the discussion of theoretical viewpoints on the economics of education development, in general, and in the context of critical issues faced by Indian education, in particular.

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