Globalization, Politics, and the Transformation of Education Systems in India since the 1990s

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Abstract

Globalization has significantly influenced the restructuring of education systems in India since the economic liberalization of the 1990s. Education has increasingly become a critical site where global economic forces, political decision-making, and national development priorities interact. Using a political economy and human capital framework, the present study examines how globalization-driven policies have transformed educational governance, funding patterns, curriculum design, and institutional structures across school and higher education sectors. The analysis highlights major reforms such as privatization, public–private partnerships, standardization of curricula, outcome-based assessment, and the rapid expansion of higher education institutions, many of which reflect neoliberal policy orientations promoted by international organizations. Alongside these changes, enduring challenges related to equity, quality, regional imbalance, language diversity, and the digital divide continue to shape educational outcomes, particularly for marginalized groups. While globalization has contributed to increased access, diversification, and internationalization of education, it has also intensified market-driven approaches and widened socio-economic disparities. A critical evaluation of these developments suggests that meaningful educational transformation requires a context-sensitive approach that balances global influences with democratic governance, inclusive policies, and social justice considerations.

Keywords: Globalization; Education Policy; Neoliberalism; Privatization; Governance; Social Equity; India.

1. Introduction

Following independence in 1947, India's political leaders viewed education as a vital instrument for nation-building and empowerment. The Constitution envisaged a fundamental right to education, while successive national policies and plans stressed its strategic importance for economic development and social equity (Bajaj, 2014). Educational systems and policies were central to debates about modernization and continuing inequities; these were the main justifications for extensive government intervention in both development planning and the education sphere. A distinctive model was established, shaped by a federal structure, the plurality of languages and cultures, and ideological concerns. By 1990, the educational system itself—strikingly expanded since the 1950s—was hardly the same as at independence, yet enduring features included low enrolment and high dropout rates in basic (primary and lower secondary) education, inadequate participation in both higher education and vocational technical education, and limited scope for the private sector.

2. Theoretical Frameworks and Conceptual Boundaries

In the Indian context, policy analysis has addressed the historical factors shaping the education system and the definitional boundaries surrounding the supply of education. Since independence, education policy has undergone periodic adjustments. The systematic, planned, and constitutional concerns of the state in offering education to its citizens remain unchanged. Education has often been

located at intersections of different parameters: between enforcement and encouragement, between education as a constitutional right and education as a welfare activity, and between formal and informal systems of education. The interface of education, economic prosperity, modernization, equity, and the education–employment relationship is prominent (Vongalis-Macrow, 2007). In such circumstances, a systematic diagnosis of Indian education policy is required in order to attempt an adequate historical diagnosis of the requirements of education policy for the country (Bajaj, 2014).

Conceptual boundaries for analyzing educational inputs, processes, and outcomes remain important in understanding the correlates of education. Educational parameters are not limited to specific economic or demographic data, such as per capita income or birth and death rates, but rather approach a broader socio-economic and socio-political interpretation of the education system. In India, particular attention has been paid to the interaction of regional human development with the parameters of education. The policy discourse surrounding the interaction of education with the different levels of economic development, modernization, and social equity is an interesting one.

3. Historical Overview of Indian Education Policy up to the 1990s

The foundation of the present Indian education system can be traced back to the British colonial period (Modi, 2021). Attempts were made to establish a national education system as part of the constitutional framework soon after independence. The introduction of the Constitution of India (GoI, 1950), which came into force on January 26, 1950, and the first education policy, the National Policy on Education, 1968, framed by the central government in 1968 laid the guidelines for the system. Several attempts have been made since then to introduce policy changes in the education system by the Government of India (GoI) and/or the Government of various states (e.g., West Bengal, Karnataka, and Maharashtra) (Aithal & Aithal, 2019). Despite these efforts, the Indian education system is still characterized by large-scale dropouts, poor access to quality education for marginalized social groups, unavailability of skill-based education, lack of a proper evaluation framework to determine learning levels, sporadic learning levels among students, an inability to provide education in the mother tongue along with a lack of inversion of the mother tongue, improper linking of education and employability, lack of continuous training of teachers and monitoring of the education system, and many other challenges (Bajaj, 2014).

The Constitution of India came into effect on January 26, 1950, and provided education as a concurrent subject for the government of India and various states. Article 45 of the Constitution of India, directed that the "State shall endeavour to provide for early childhood care and education for all children until they complete the age of six years," which was expected to be achieved within a period of ten years from the commencement of the Constitution. Accordingly, the First Five-Year Plan (FYP) also accorded special attention to education in the Primary Sector. After Independence, the first concern of the Government was to relieve the country from the clutches of Colonial Rule and to protect the boundaries. The budgeting for education was very low since there was serious dearth of funds for the elimination of poverty, famine, improvement of communication, development of transport, animal husbandry, irrigation, agriculture development, and other essential areas of development for human survival. Thus priority was given for the Adult sector where the first recommendation of education was made on March 20, 1951 which was to provide Adult Education to the people of India so that they can enjoy the fruits of independence effectively. Education was given the least preference while appropriating the funds.

4. Liberalization, Globalization, and Economic Imperatives

In 1991, liberalization transformed the Indian economy from a fragile, sheltered system to a more dynamic and market-oriented model. The liberalization process coincided with globalization. National economic reforms, leading to development goals and pressures for educational reform, occurred when the world was already characterized by globalization. Globalization increased pressures to align national policies with norms and practices generally accepted to articulate international development agendas supported by intergovernmental organizations like the World Bank (Vongalis-Macrow, 2007). Education was expected to play a vital role in building a national economy, strengthening linkages between education and economic outcomes. Economic growth was recognized

as a critical national goal, and the human capital approach was the most influential theoretical framework influencing the perception of educational attainment and the demands for reform. Implicitly, this indicated that educational development required greater and broader attention from government or society.

In this context, the human capital approach guided the reform process, establishing a genuine preliminary condition for education without limiting the approach and emphasizing the broader notion of economic growth. Broadening the economic criteria at the aggregate, macro, or economic system level redefined national aspirations and could involve "wrong" monetary policies whose reversal was leveraged through education. A broader line of reasoning, encompassing the non-traditional background and anticipating human capabilities later popularized as capability theory, pointed toward the economy of education. Extensive demand for post-compulsory education on unenforced, indirect, or dormant bases earlier compounded by local-capital-accumulation policies drove high and higher education policy throughout the entire economy. Even under extensive consideration of educational limitation, the employment expansion process analysis for unskilled-labour-intensive sectors led unexpectedly to severe weathering and sweeping policy revisions.

5. Privatization, Public-Private Partnerships, and Access

Privatization has emerged as a prominent trend within the Indian education system following the neoliberal reforms of the early 1990s. The new policy focus under the earlier National Policy on Education (NPE 1986, revised in 1992) was to provide education that was "equitable, relevant, and of good quality" (Maiti, 2014). Rapidly increasing population and rising aspirations, however, complicated government attempts to realize these objectives. In this context, privatization is viewed as a means to provide adequate supply and a more competitive environment for educational provision, although a growing concern about the productivity of state and private systems remains on the Indian policy agenda. Two complementary forms of privatization are being contemplated: establishment of privately owned schools that charge fees, and collaboration between private operators and the government (public–private partnerships, or PPPs). PPP arrangements have been framed in the context of greater autonomy and community participation and experimentation, and are viewed as a way to provide schooling to children of the most disadvantaged segments of society. Nevertheless, concerns about social equity with regard to both preferential access and quality of supply—notably in relation to private schooling and PPP initiatives—are driving demand for publicly funded, managed, and operated educational institutions.

During the early years of India's independence, significant efforts were made to expand and develop the educational system and infrastructure, but the system remained far from meeting demand. A small group of elite private institutions began to emerge under British rule, catering to students from privileged backgrounds, but western-style higher education was introduced only after independence. Private investments in education remained restricted and lacked any significant financial incentive until the economic reforms of the early 1990s. The rigid controls imposed during the first four decades of independence limited the expansion of the higher education sector in terms of both supply and curriculum diversification, prompting students to pursue education in what remained an elitist private sector.

Consequently, institutional and policy analysis of the constraints and opportunities of the pre-reform economy highlighted the centrality of much wider barriers to access in deepening social, economic, and gender inequities. On the demand side, the political conveyance of these unmet aspirations during the latter stages of the first regime and the beginning of the second correlated with a distinct fall-off in the political support for and credibility of much-needed supply-related economic reform, as well as an equitable growth trajectory in global policy advisory discourse and pressure.

These broader preconditions for openings and the direction and scope of the significant structural changes initiated at the macro-economic level constituted the momentum for the education-related reform agenda crystallized in the follow-up NPE. The teachers unions demonized privatization through student-led protests that disrupted the functioning of private institutions (Untari, 2016).

Given that, this study seeks to dial back on the policy effects that were actually, locally, and substantively felt.

6. Curriculum Reform, Standardization, and Assessment

Extensive curriculum reform has followed 1990s education policy changes. A primary goal of these reforms was to enhance employability through improved competencies and standards (Bajaj, 2014). The launch of the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) in 2005 marked a critical point in this reform process. Focusing on contemporary educational needs, the NCF called for a flexible approach to curriculum and pedagogies, advocating learning as a constructive process of building understanding rather than rote memorization (Batra, 2021). Despite widespread implementation of the framework, its orientation toward enhancing life skills and competencies remained largely unaddressed in practice. A concurrent thrice-revised and considerably prolonged examination reform also aimed at fostering similar competencies, culminating in a National Policy on Education–mandated Comprehensive and Continuous Evaluation (CCE). Yet implementation at the primary level still awaited experimentation, and additional issues inhibited progress toward the employment goal, including failures in teacher education and pedagogy that discouraged innovative approaches.

Critical analysis of national learning achievement surveys subsequently revealed stark deficiencies among compulsory-education pupils in literacy, numeracy, and other skill areas deemed vital for livelihood. The monitoring framework therefore shifted focus to curricular alignment instead of competence development. In 2016 the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) proposed a revised CCE framework that segregated curricular restructuring from assessment enhancement. Continued emphasis on the significance of skills, competencies, and employability suggests policy intent remains unaltered despite evolving terms and modalities. Over the years, numerous states have adopted variations of the CCE model and accompanying curricular guidelines while central directives increasingly devolved to state governments within a broader skills agenda.

7. Higher Education: Expansion, Autonomy, and Quality Assurance

The dramatic expansion of India's higher education system since the early 1990s has transformed the landscape of higher education in India. A major policy shift occurred from 1990 onwards. Until then, the policy of the Indian government was to keep the higher education system relatively stable as a conscious decision to protect higher education from economic liberalization. The state-controlled system had also shown tremendous resilience. For example, between 1950 and 1990, the number of universities increased from 18 to 185; the number of affiliated colleges from around 500 to about 6,000; and gross enrolment ratio at higher education level rose from less than 1% to about 5% (Maiti, 2014) , which was considered outstanding given the economic profile of the country. With the major policies of economic liberalization set into motion through 1991, an expansion and growth policy was initiated to permit an increase in the number of universities and colleges as part of a deliberate policy to construct a new environment for the education system. A far-reaching policy document "Policy Perspectives" prepared by Kothari Commission objectives for higher education were made explicit quality, equity, access, and education (H Waghodekar, 2018).

The political will combined with systemic action would create the conditions under which the higher education system would be able to make necessary alterations to the existing structures, policies, and regulations. Growth and expansion in higher education was seen not only as a necessity but also as an opportunity for the system to remake itself and not merely to expand on the existing inadequate and missing structures. Kothari Commission's new thinking regarding the purpose of higher education and the quality of education countenanced a major new perspective. On the one hand, the Commission's report built on the existing significant reports and preserved the equity remains as crucial component of whole structure while adding new dimensions of quality and excellence that had been explicitly missing from the earlier framework. The Report's views on the extent and form of growth and expansion for higher education sought to move beyond both the earlier steward approach and the strictly liberalization or growth-at-all-cost point of view.

8. Language Policy, Inclusivity, and Social Equity

Language policy in education, including the use of the medium of instruction, influences the inclusivity of the system, particularly for students belonging to linguistic minorities. An inclusive education system is expected to foster social equity. In India, multilingualism is a significant asset; yet, language policy increasingly appears to promote English at the expense of indigenous languages. The medium of instruction for the early years at school determines the closure or opening of many opportunities for students to learn languages and acquire knowledge throughout their life (M. Sarangapani, 2016). Wealth and politics play a crucial role in language policies for education and social equity.

Multilingual language policies encourage teaching in more than one language, whereas language policies that restrict the number of languages jeopardize equitable opportunities to learn different languages. Deliberations are ongoing on multilingualism as a resource and bilingualism with English and a native language. English is often perceived as the language of opportunity, while tribal languages are recognized in the education system with the understanding that school use will not help in finding employment. Recognition of the need for including tribal languages has encountered bureaucratic hurdles in drafting guidelines and a corresponding unwillingness for wide discussions. Language policies impact identity, culture, and corresponding social categories (Raj Devkota, 2018). Both local and global influences shape language policies and provision, with political and social engagement crucial for articulating a consensus aligned with present conditions and addressing political, economic, and cultural needs.

9. Technology, Edtech, and the Digital Divide

Globally, the past few decades have been characterized by the embracing of technology, with a focus towards leveraging educational technology (edtech) to accelerate reforms. Edtech promises to expand educational opportunities for more diverse learners while fostering more engaging pedagogies (Kumar Nag, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic precipitated a shift of educational activities to digital platforms, underscoring the importance of the digital divide within educational debates. In India, a variety of initiatives before and during the pandemic sought to widen the reach of technology in the education sector, aiming to help teachers, learners, and parents as 21st-century pedagogical skills gained prominence (Bajpai et al., 2019).

10. Regional Variations: State-Level Responses and Challenges

Despite a shared constitutional framework and similar national education policies, implementation of reforms has taken divergent paths across Indian states. Beginning with the 1990s liberalization context, subsequent reforms have been influenced by how educational governance is structured at the state level and which state agencies hold power (Bajaj, 2014). The agency of states in shaping implementation trajectories, particularly through financial resource allocation, is critical to comprehension of national reforms. Compared globally, the agency of states, especially in the design of existing regulations, is also a distinguishing characteristic of Indian federalism (Chatterjee et al., 1970). States were assigned responsibility for education in the Constitution and remain responsible for funding and regulating both public and private education. Each state is free to leverage central assistance as a means of addressing regional challenges. Although the Ministry of Human Resource Development issues central policy statements, the states exert agency in determining the precise form that national programmes will take at the level of implementation.

Policy dimensions related to increased centralization, privatization, and regulation are particularly relevant for comparative state-level analysis. The ability to derive best practices from socio-economic, cultural, and political variation across regions is essential. Overall, policy reforms during the 1990s Mediterranean liberalization have incorporated assignment of governing bodies, increase in regulatory constraints, promotion of degrees, and enactment of wide-ranging private-sector Acts.

11. Political Debates, Governance, and Civil Society Actors

Political dynamics, governance structures, and civil society advocacy contestations shape the trajectories of education reforms in India. The evolution of education governance since the mid-1990s has revolved around the roles of different levels of government, particularly the central government and state governments, diverse school systems where formal, informal and private systems complement state systems, and civil society organizations (Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2010). The increasing influence of civil society on education debates and reforms marks a significant shift from the conventional role of civil society organizations that mainly acted as implementers in government-funded education projects, leveraging grassroots knowledge to improve the education system (Bajaj, 2014).

An array of civil society actors has emerged in education debates among various levels of government, political parties, the judiciary, and political leaders across diverse media, including print, television, and public platforms. The terms of these debates encompass governance, quality and equity, curriculum, pedagogy, school organization, democratic education, educational planning, and the place of recommendations of commissions and committees in policy formulation. The variety of actors, issues, and agendas as well as media diversity expand the scope of the debates, rendering significant civil society influence on education reform in the country.

12. Impacts on Equity, Quality, and Outcomes

Since the 1990s, efforts have been made to achieve universalisation of primary education, reform elementary education, and enhance teacher professionalism. The Mid Day Meal Scheme was an initiative designed to increase school attendance. The National Curriculum Framework 2005 and the National Achievement Survey were launched to assess the quality of education. Public-private partnerships for better governance and decentralisation for improved resource allocation represented another policy effort. Overall, these measures sought to address disparities in participation and learning, and extend access to quality education for marginalised groups (Bajaj, 2014).

In higher education, privatisation and commercialisation of knowledge have increased under neo-liberal reforms. The elite have come to dominate the system, and there is a growing chasm between the opportunities available to them and those available for marginalised sections of society. These inequities persist despite large public investment in the sector. Large-scale private savings are being mobilised to complement government funding, but this raises the risk of social values being replaced by market values. The focus on private funding is seen as a mechanism to expand access to higher education while protecting publicly financed institutions from political interference. Unchecked privatisation is associated with social unrest, unemployment, growing economic inequality, and difficulties in sustaining quality and global competitiveness. Controlled privatization accompanied by an appropriate regulatory framework is therefore critical (Maiti, 2014).

13. Global Narratives versus Local Realities

Education reforms must be situated within a local context, which is particularly evident in policymaking processes, advocacy for social justice, and accommodating a diverse population. Reform discourses are not driven merely by a global agenda; they are positioned differently by national players with multiple, even countervailing, influences (Vongalis-Macrow, 2009). Globality connects the local with the international; reform endeavours are imbued with this connection and extra-national policy diffusions, thus remaining distinct. Conceptions of education, especially concerning equity and anti-imperialism, differ widely from a simplistic embrace of globalized education (Alberto Torres, 2015). While global facts and processes deeply engender the reform agenda, it cannot be adequately addressed through the hegemonic frames of articulating an education policy congruent with the imperatives of a globalizing world system (Amita Raj Gargey & Amit Kashyap, 2017).

A global narrative asserts that world realities alter swiftly, creating a need for accurate, realistic education about the world and viewing history as the story of humanity as a whole; reform agendas depart from these premises, reflecting the country's specific historical reality and internal

workings. Considerations of the reform agenda have tended to deploy a global linguistic form. The educational policies of international organizations such as UNESCO and the OECD during this period provide additional evidence of the widespread adoption of the global frame, elaborating on the theme of a world increasingly dominated by transnational processes; Indian trajectories diverge saliently from these run-of-the-mill formulations. Enunciations of these aspirations often focus upon the need to develop a "world citizen," a dimension of the reform template which in turn links seamlessly with advocacy of education for the skills of commerce, manufacture, governance, and social organization that would give individuals the capacity to prosper in a rapidly transforming milieu. Such trajectories of reforms in altering the educational mix have significantly greater traction than their counterparts entrenched within a more encompassing globalization frame, notwithstanding the potency of intra-Hindi reform advocates and associated organizations and their heightened reach since the mid-1990s.

14. Conclusion

Analysis of Indian education developments since 1990 suggests that initial responses to globalization may no longer be the most pressing issues, nor the most compelling justifications for further change. Centralization and the imposition of skill-oriented curricula still dominate the agenda, undermining India's vast, locally responsive network and risking the imposition of a hegemonic, one-size-fits-all approach to knowledge (Bajaj, 2014). In both basic and higher education, aspirational global positionings may be misaligned with the core challenges of expanding meaningful access to quality learning for the vast majority, which remains unfulfilled after decades of policy discourse and moves toward large-scale reform. The project to build a globally linked, world-class higher-education sector may overlook the need to "first achieve average, then see what is globally acceptable". Moreover, coherence and connection between the levels of the system appear less evident, reinforcing the concern that individual reforms may remain isolated from a fully considered approach to quality improvement throughout the system. The analysis underscores the necessity of developing a broader framework that can better guide educational strategy across the multiple actors and sectors now constituting the education landscape in India.

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