ICSSR sponsored National Seminar on

School Education in India: Towards Equitable Access to Quality Education for All

Durgabai Deshmukh Annual Seminar 2025

15-16 July 2025

Organised by
Muchkund Dubey Centre for Right to Education
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School Education in India
Towards Equitable Access to Quality Education for All

15-16 July 2025

Venue: Seminar Hall 1 & 2, Kamla Devi Complex,
India International Centre, New Delhi

Concept Note

BACKGROUND

India has set ambitious development goals since its independence in 1947. The Constitution of India laid the foundation for the country's development trajectory, embedding key democratic principles such as secularism, equity, equality, fairness, and social justice. In the domain of education, the Constitution embraced a rights perspective, and mandated free and compulsory education for all children aged 6–14 years as a fundamental right under Article 21A. Over the years, there has been the pursuit towards providing equitable education for all children. The Kothari Commission emphasised that the social objective of education is to equalise educational opportunity and enable the underprivileged classes to use it as a lever for improvement of their conditions. Such commitments to equitable education was emphasised in the various policy documents too. The National Policy on Education (NPE), 1968 emphasised that equalisation of educational opportunity is important to address issues of regional imbalances, education of girls, backward classes, tribal population and the handicapped. Similarly, the National Education Policy (NEP), 1986, and the subsequent Plan of Action, 1992, highlighted the significant relevance of education in attaining equality and laid down a roadmap to address the educational needs of SCs/STs, minorities, girls, backward sections and children with special needs. The NEP 2020 too regarded education as the greatest tool for achieving social justice and equality and the policy reaffirmed that the major goal of education sector is to bridge the gaps in access, participation and learning outcome in school education. Vision Viksit Bharat @ 2047 also emphasises on inclusive development, to reach the goal of becoming a developed nation by the centenary of India's independence.

Beyond such national goals, India has also been a signatory to several international commitments aimed at promoting inclusive and equitable education. From the Jomtien Declaration (1990) to the Sustainable Development Agenda (2015), the country has consistently reaffirmed its commitment to global educational priorities. Under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Goal 4 (SDG 4) focuses on ensuring inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all by 2030. SDG 4 outlines a set of targets and strategies that emphasize not only school access but also quality learning, lifelong education, early childhood care and development, improved learning outcomes, and relevant skill-building for youth and adults. Furthermore, it highlights the educational needs of women, persons with

disabilities, and marginalized communities, while promoting education for sustainable development (ESD), human rights, gender equality, global citizenship, and cultural diversity.[1]

Despite these commitments to the national and international goals, India continues to face significant challenges in achieving equitable access to quality education; inclusive and equitable education is still a distant dream for many. According to the Human Development Report 2023 India ranked 132 out of 193 countries on the Human Development Index (HDI), with education playing a crucial role in determining overall human development.[2] The report highlights that India's mean years of schooling stand at 6.6 years, significantly lower than the global average of 8.7 years. Further, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) at the higher secondary level remains low, disproportionately affecting rural and marginalized communities.[3] Comparatively, as noted by a World Bank Report, countries such as Vietnam have implemented targeted policies that have successfully improved enrolment and retention rates.[4]

In India, despite having 'equity' and 'social justice' as the foundational principles of Indian democracy, there are disparities in educational access and quality, which continues to widen across different sections of society. A 2018 study by the Azim Premji Foundation found that only 34.4% of children from the poorest households completed ten years of education, compared to 73.4% from the wealthiest households.[5] Similarly, research by the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA) highlights that students from higher socio-economic backgrounds have greater access to quality education, higher educational aspirations, and better academic performance, while those from lower socio-economic backgrounds face multiple barriers, including inadequate infrastructure, limited resources, and restricted access to quality schools (Kumar, 2020). Gender disparities further compound these inequalities. Girls, in particular, encounter significant obstacles such as gender-based violence, discrimination, early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and inadequate sanitary facilities, all of which hinder their educational attainment.[6] In addition, caste background and politico-economic factors acts as deterrents in reaping educational

[1] UNESCO (2022): 'Official List of SDG 4 Indicators', UNESCO Institute for Statistics. Available at https://tcg.uis.unesco.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2020/09/SDG4_indicator_list.pdf

[2] UNDP (2024). *Human Development Report 2023/2024—Breaking the Gridlock: Reimagining Cooperation in a Polarized World,* New York: UNDP. accessed on 3 March 2025, available at: https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/global-report-document/hdr2023-24reporten.pdf

[3] Government of India. (2022). *All India Survey on Higher Education 2021-22*, New Delhi: Ministry of Education, Government of India, accessed on 3 March 2025, available at: https://cdnbbsr.s3waas.gov.in/s392049debbe566ca5782a3045cf300a3c/uploads/2024/02/20240719952688509.pdf

[4] Parajuli, Dilip, Dung Kieu Vo, Jamil Salmi, and Nguyet Thi Anh Tran. (2020). *Improving the Performance of Higher Education in Vietnam: Strategic Priorities and Policy Options.* Washington, DC: World Bank. accessed on 3 March 2025, available at: https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/347431588175259657/pdf/Improving-the-Performance-of-Higher-Education-in-Vietnam-Strategic-Priorities-and-Policy-Options.pdf

[5] Azim Premji Foundation. (2018). Education in India: A Review of the Literature. Bangalore: Azim Premji Foundation.

[6] World Bank. (2018). *Gender and Education in India.* Washington, DC: World Bank.

achievements.[7] Socio-economic factors such as caste, class, gender, religion, region, and language further exacerbate these inequalities, making equitable education an on-going challenge. These disparities disproportionately affect marginalized communities, limiting their opportunities for social and economic mobility.

Although backed by the constitutional mandate, educational policies, and the enactment of the Right to Education (RTE) Act, the pursuit of educational equity has encountered significant setbacks. While government policies claim to promote inclusive development, they often reinforce existing disparities. For instance, initiatives such as the privatization of education, voucher programs, charter schools, performance-based pay for teachers, and standardization measures exacerbate inequality by deepening segregation based on socioeconomic background, gender, and geographical location.[8] Though financial allocation plays a crucial role in determining access to quality education, the decline in union government spending from 4.7% of GDP in 2012–13 to 2.9% in 2023–24 signals a diminishing priority for education funding. In addition, there are persistent implementation challenges, which further exacerbate inequalities. For instance, inadequacy of teachers, disparities in teacher quality, infrastructure gaps, and inconsistencies in curriculum delivery create vastly different educational experiences for students, disproportionately affecting marginalized communities.

These layered complexities call for a critical examination of how policy decisions, declining financial allocation, and implementation challenges have contributed to an increasingly stratified education system, ultimately undermining the goal of equitable access for all. It is in this context, that this seminar intends to examine and reflect on India's progress in achieving equitable access to school education. Where does India stand today in ensuring educational equity? Have we succeeded in reducing internal inequalities in education provision? Who has access to quality education, and what factors determine the nature of this access? In our efforts towards equitable distribution of schooling facilities, how does the layering in the education structure operates? If the system itself is inherently unequal, how can equitable access be realised and what policy measures and systemic interventions are needed to compensate for the handicaps? This two-day National Seminar on *School Education in India: Towards Equitable Access to Quality Education for All* aims to critically examine these pressing challenges, engaging policymakers, researchers, and practitioners in discussions that seek to generate concrete solutions for achieving equitable educational access for all.

SEMINAR FOCUS

Against the backdrop discussed above, this seminar aims to critically explore the persistent challenges in achieving equitable access to quality school education in India. Despite policy commitments and legal mandates, disparities in education continue to widen, raising crucial

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[7] Vasavi, A.R. (2022). *Differentiation and Disjunction: Interrogating India's Education System,* Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan.
[8] Hill, D., & Kumar, R. (2009). Neoliberalism and its Impacts. In D. Hill, & R. Kumar, *Global Neoliberalism and Education and its Consequences.* New York: Routledge.

questions about the effectiveness of existing interventions. Where does India stand in ensuring educational equity? Have internal inequalities in education provision been addressed, or have they deepened due to structural and policy-driven stratifications and differentiations in schools? This seminar will delve into the factors that shape access to quality education, examine how the layered education system reinforces inequities, and explore policy measures and systemic interventions necessary to bridge these gaps. Bringing together policymakers, researchers, and practitioners, the seminar seeks to foster meaningful discussions and generate actionable strategies to move closer to the goal of inclusive and equitable education. Thus the focus area of the Seminar is to re-examine our approach and look for solutions to reduce graded inequalities in school education, addressing the layering and differentiation that lead to discrimination, unequal access, and disparities in quality.

Diverse range of research papers, case studies, and field interventions will be included in the seminar, which will contribute towards both theory building and presentation of ground realities on critical issues related to inequality in education and the promotion of equitable access to quality school education. It is hoped that the two-day deliberation in the seminar will throw light on new insights, offer new perspectives and suggest way forward in ensuring that quality education becomes accessible to all.

SEMINAR THEMES

The seminar intends to focus on few thematic areas that will explore critical issues in school education in India with a focus on achieving equitable access to quality education for all. While addressing the challenges of educational inequality and exploring solutions for inclusive development, contributions from educational experts and presenters are expected to adopt theoretical and practical perspectives.

Equality and Social Justice: A Rights-Based Perspective

Education is a fundamental right and a key instrument for achieving social justice and equality. However, systemic barriers related to caste, class, gender, disability, and geography continue to hinder equitable access to quality education. While constitutional provisions and policy frameworks emphasize the importance of inclusive education, deeply rooted structural inequalities persist, limiting opportunities for marginalised communities. This session will examine education through a rights-based lens, focusing on themes such as *Legal and Policy Frameworks for Equitable Education, Caste and Gender-based Discrimination in Schools, Addressing Socio-Economic and Cultural Barriers, Empowering Marginalized Communities through Education, Reducing Inequality through the Common School System, and Education as an Equalizer and Tool for Social Mobility*.

Papers in this session may explore how RTE legislation and commitments to international Conventions and development goals (SDG 4) have shaped access to education and assess their effectiveness in reducing disparities. Contributions may analyse the role of policy and financial allocations in shaping access to education, highlight the gaps in implementation and disparities across regions and social groups. Presenters are encouraged to critically analyse the impact of caste and gender hierarchies on schooling experiences, examine economic and

cultural barriers to education, assess role of affirmative action in addressing past and current inequalities in education and highlight strategies for inclusive education. Discussions on how the Common School System can reduce inequality, the role of public versus private education in social mobility, and the intersectionality of multiple vulnerabilities in shaping educational access will be particularly relevant. Empirical research, state level case studies, and theoretical analyses that provide insights into strengthening the role of education as a tool for equity and justice are welcome.

Local Governance and Community Engagement

Strengthening local governance and promoting community engagement are crucial for ensuring inclusive and accountable education systems. Moreover, empowered local bodies can address context-specific challenges and foster a sense of ownership among stakeholders, such as Block Resource Centres (BRCs), Cluster Resource Centres (CRCs), and Panchayats in strengthening school education. This session will explore how decentralized decision-making, active participation of local bodies, and collaboration with communities can improve school management, resource allocation, and learning outcomes. Key discussions will revolve around *Role of Local Government in Education, Role of Education Administrators – BRCs and CRCs, Community Participation in School Governance, and Social Accountability Mechanisms for Strengthening Education Systems*.

Papers in this session may examine the effectiveness of decentralisation in school governance, analysing how local bodies such as Panchayats, School Management Committees (SMCs), and urban local bodies contribute to decision-making, resource distribution and strengthening of public schools. Contributors are encouraged to explore the role of education administrators like BRCs and CRCs in capacity building, monitoring, and support for schools. Discussions may also include case studies on successful community participation models, challenges in ensuring accountability at the grassroots level, and mechanisms for improving transparency in school governance. Empirical research, policy reviews, and comparative studies that offer insights into strengthening local governance and fostering meaningful community engagement in education are particularly welcome.

Towards Building a Professional Community of Teachers

Teachers play a pivotal role in ensuring quality education, yet issues related to their recruitment, training, working conditions, work load and teacher quality impact learning outcomes significantly. Ensuring a structured approach to teacher education, continuous professional development, and a balance between autonomy and accountability is essential to strengthening the teaching profession. At the same time, issues such as inadequate pre-service and in-service training, disparities in teacher deployment, and growing administrative burdens on teachers need to be addressed to create a more effective and motivated teaching workforce. This session will examine the need for a structured approach to teacher education, continuous professional development, and accountability and autonomy in the teaching profession. Key areas of focus will include *Teacher Recruitment, Training and Capacity*

Building, Teacher Availability and Quality, Teacher Status, Autonomy, and Professionalism to enhance the status and effectiveness of the teaching profession.

This session invites research and discussions on various aspects of the teaching profession. Papers can explore challenges in teacher recruitment policies, gaps in pre-service and in-service training, and innovative models for continuous professional development. Discussions on teacher workload, contractual appointments, and working conditions will be valuable in understanding their impact on teacher motivation and retention. The session also encourages analysis of teacher autonomy in curriculum and pedagogy, the role of governance structures in teacher accountability, and how professional networks and teacher communities can promote peer learning and support. Empirical research, comparative studies, and policy analyses that provide insights into improving teacher professionalism and addressing systemic gaps in the teaching workforce are particularly welcome.

Pursuing Equity in Quality

Ensuring that every child has access to quality education is fundamental to building an inclusive society. However, disparities in infrastructure, teacher availability, and learning resources across different schooling systems continue to widen existing gaps. Unequal access to quality education is not just a question of financial allocation by government or access to those with financial resources, but also of systemic inequalities that shape learning outcomes, particularly for children from marginalised communities. This session will examine the barriers to equitable access, evaluate the effectiveness of policy interventions, and explore pathways to create a more inclusive education system that guarantees quality schooling for all children, regardless of their background. It will delve into key sub-themes, including *Public vs. Private Schooling, Systemic and Structural Barriers to Equitable Access, and Policy Measures and Practices for Ensuring Equity in Quality Education.*

Papers in this session may examine how disparities in educational quality manifest across different types of schools—government, private, low-cost private, and alternative schooling models—and their implications for equity. Paper presenters are encouraged to critically engage with various dimensions of equitable access to education and throw light on who gets what kind of access. Contributors are encouraged to explore how policies such as teacher recruitment, curriculum design, and assessment methods impact the quality of education and whether they promote or hinder equitable learning outcomes. Papers could also examine the role of socio-economic status, gender, disability, caste, and geographical location in determining educational opportunities. Additionally, discussions on participation and completion, dropout issue, impact of privatization, differential schooling systems, and the digital divide on equitable access will be relevant. Discussions may also include the role of digital learning, access to learning resources, teacher training, and community participation in bridging the quality gap. Empirical research, state level case studies, comparative analyses and theoretical analyses that highlight innovative approaches to improving quality while maintaining equity in education are particularly welcome. Further, policy critiques that offer insights into best practices, innovative models, and strategies to strengthen equity in school education are encouraged.

Is there a Learning Crisis?

The learning crisis remains a critical challenge, with many children attending school but failing to acquire essential knowledge and skills. This issue has been further exacerbated in the post-COVID-19 period, as prolonged school closures, limited access to digital learning, and socio-economic disruptions have widened existing educational gaps. Foundational literacy and numeracy remain a significant concern, particularly for children from marginalised communities who lack access to quality learning resources and support systems. Additionally, variations in teacher quality, curriculum design, pedagogical methods, and assessment practices contribute to learning disparities, preventing many students from reaching their full potential. This session will explore key sub-themes, including *Foundational Learning Gaps, Assessment and Learning Outcomes, School Climate and Environment for Learning,* and *Innovative Pedagogical Approaches and Practices in Learning Recovery*.

Papers in this session may examine the factors contributing to the learning crisis, including the effectiveness of policy interventions, the role of teachers in bridging learning gaps, and the impact of socio-economic and technological disparities on students' learning trajectories. Research that provides critical insights into best practices for improving foundational literacy and numeracy, school-based interventions for learning recovery, and innovative pedagogical models adopted by educational stakeholders will be particularly valuable. Papers can critically analyse the promises and limitations of EdTech in promoting foundational learning, Empirical studies, comparative analyses, and field-based observations that offer practical solutions to address the learning crisis are encouraged.

Centre State Relationship in School Education

Education in India falls under the Concurrent List, requiring coordinated efforts between the Centre and the States in policy formulation, funding, and implementation. However, disparities in financial allocation, policy priorities, and governance structures often lead to inconsistencies in educational outcomes across states. Effectiveness of a central policy like the National Education Policy (NEP) and the implementation of central and state programmes and schemes depend on the capacities, priorities, and financial autonomy of individual states and the centre-state synergy. Disparities in resource allocation, decision-making authority, and administrative control create variations in educational access and quality across regions, impacting equitable development in school education. This session will explore key aspects such as *Decentralization and Policy Implementation, Financing, Control and Resource Distribution, and Centre-State Synergy and Coordination in Strengthening Public Education.*

Papers in this session may examine the nature of Centre-State dynamics in education governance, highlighting challenges in financial devolution, intergovernmental cooperation, and the autonomy of states in tailoring policies to local needs. Discussions can also focus on the impact of centrally sponsored schemes on state-level educational reforms, the efficiency of fund utilisation, and policy conflicts that arise due to overlapping jurisdiction. Additionally, this session invites research on the relationship between the Centre and States

in school education, examining its impact on specific policies and schemes, funding patterns, and governance structures. Empirical studies, comparative analyses of state-level policy variations, and case studies examining the challenges, gaps, and implications of Centre-State dynamics in shaping school education outcomes will be particularly valuable.

SEMINAR PROGRAMME

The Seminar will consist of an Opening session that will set the context for the thematic discussions that will follow. The keynote address will provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of school education in India, highlighting persistent inequalities in access and quality. This will be followed by deliberations on the six thematic areas highlighted above. A special lecture by an eminent expert will also be a part of this two-day National Seminar, offering insights and perspectives on 'Equity and Social Justice in Education'. Concluding Session will provide a holistic perspective on addressing educational inequalities and outline actionable recommendations for fostering an inclusive and just education system in India, in addition to summarizing the key discussions of the two-day event.

ORGANISING TEAM

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