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Elitism and its challengers: Educational development ideology in postcolonial India through the prism of film, 1950–1970

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the ideological foundations of state-led educational development in India, as reflected in documentary films produced by the Films Division of India, the institution tasked with spreading the government's vision for developing India. An analysis of documentaries concerned with educational development made from 1950 to 1970 shows contradictory educational visions that reflect the different understanding various groups of actors within the government had about the role education would play in Indian society. These tensions and contestations echo present-day debates about Indian education and help illuminate the dynamics currently at play in the gap between state rhetoric and the delivery of education in India.

1. Introduction

India's educational development project has suffered for decades from a pronounced gap between rhetoric and delivery.[1] Despite the government's oft-repeated goal of bringing educational opportunities to the country's poor and marginalised—which is firmly rooted in Indian nationalist thought, written into the constitution and reaffirmed in a myriad of policy frameworks[2]—India continues to struggle to provide quality education to all of its children 70 years after Independence. Recent research in educational development shows that millions of Indian children remain out of school, and many of those who do attend are faced with inadequate schooling quality. Using Young Lives data to compare primary education outcomes in India and Vietnam, Rolleston and James concluded that "low levels of quality, efficiency, and equity in basic education" (Rolleston and James, 2015, p. 301) are among the main reasons education outcomes in India are much poorer than in Vietnam. Studies that have looked beyond primary schooling also have noted significant inequalities in Indian education: a trend analysis using data from 1993 through 2009 found that overall inequality remained high (with a Gini coefficient above 50%), that only 8% of India's population had access to higher education and that significant disparities prevailed between urban and rural areas in both access to and quality of education (Agrawal, 2014). Moreover, secondary education participation remains low and unequally distributed (Kingdon, 2007). The Indian education system arguably continues to reproduce and amplify inequalities of the 'accident of birth,' rather than creating a level playing field for all.

One of the key gaps between the state's promises and on-the-ground reality is the failure of successive Indian governments to allocate sufficient funding to meet their goals of access, inclusion and quality. According to the noted Indian economist of education J. B. G. Tilak, viewing education as a public good and a human right "is not ingrained in the minds of our union or state government functionaries, particularly the economic and educational policymakers and planners" (Tilak, 2009, p. 70). In 1951, the Indian state spent a mere 0.6% of its GDP on education; by 1971 it was spending 2% (Mangla, 2017). In 1966, the government-appointed Kothari Commission criticised what it saw as inadequate spending and recommended that 6% of GDP be allocated to education. This suggestion, along with many other proposals, went unheeded by the government (Tilak, 2007). As Rao et al. (2003) note, the Indian state lacked an integrated approach to primary education after Independence and only committed to this agenda more seriously from the 1980s onward. Although new policy initiatives such as Operation Blackboard took off during this time (Dyer, 1996), budgetary allocations remained insufficient and debate about the 'public gap' in education spending continued to rage through the 1990s and 2000s (Shariff and Ghosh, 2000). Responding to the Right to Education Act passed in 2009, which was designed to guarantee all Indian children

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[1] India is not the only country suffering from such a gap. Many countries' constitutions include a right to education. While Heymann et al. (2014) found that constitutional protection of free education is linked to significantly higher net enrolments, Edwards and Garcia Marin (2015) concluded in their analysis of 2012 PISA data from 61 countries that there is no evidence such protections lead to improved learning outcomes.

[2] The commitment to universal quality education has been echoed in a number of policy milestones over India's 70 years of independence, including the constitution, the Kothari Commission of 1964, the National Education policy of 1986 and its 1992 amendments and the Right to Education Act of 2009.

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access to a quality education,[3] Santosh Mehrotra noted that the legislation would require a significant increase in public spending, which he predicted both the central and state governments would have difficulty meeting (Mehrotra, 2012). Indeed, public education in India continues to be underfunded,[4] and the exponential growth of private schools (including private schools for the poor) has meant that many parents and students in India have given up on the promise of an effective public education system.[5]

There are other gaps, too. Just as the world community's focus has shifted from merely providing access to education for all children to monitoring and improving the educational content and quality (Chabbott, 2009; Sifuna, 2007), the Indian government no longer sees access as the only measure of educational development in the country. Combating discrimination in the school system has emerged as another major focus. Despite the many commitments made by both the central and state governments to tackle discrimination based on socioeconomic status, caste, religion and gender, a Human Rights Watch report on the implementation of the Rights to Education Act of 2009 found not only numerous instances of discrimination against children from disadvantaged groups, but also the systemic failure of government organisations to monitor, identify and respond to such violations (Human Rights Watch, 2014). Gender discrimination and discrimination against lower caste groups, which have been well documented, remain high despite government pronouncements to ensure equality in education (Agrawal, 2014; Arora, 2012; Asadullah and Yalonetzky, 2012; Singh and Mukherjee, 2017). The promises made in the Indian Constitution of 1948 notwithstanding, quality education remains a distant dream for many in India.

Understanding the reasons behind these gaps calls for an analysis that goes beyond merely examining the education policies of India's post-Independence governments. What is needed is to situate these measures in the context of the historical evolution of policy (Pierson, 2005) and the underlying educational visions of the ruling elites. The limitations of Indian democracy and its authoritarian traits (Jalal, 2009), the state's clientelistic character (Markussen, 2011) and the persistence of colonial ideas about education (Kumar, 2005) are among the insights that may illuminate possible reasons for the failure of the Indian state to deliver on its promises. Yet, with rare exceptions (e.g., Peppin Vaughan, 2013), few recent studies of educational development policy have engaged with the history of educational thought in India.

In this article, I trace the contours of the educational vision of the post-Independence government from 1950 to 1970, as reflected in a sample of 15 documentary films focused on educational development made by the Films Division of India (FDI).[6] The paper suggests that, even though instrumental and elitist approaches to education that were analogous to colonial-era education ideology dominated FDI's output of films, critiques of the model appeared as early as 1950s. The difficulty in achieving equality has therefore rested not in the absence of government vision but in turning that vision into reality. Some of the perceived conceptual changes in recent educational development in India (such as the shift in emphasis from access to quality, or from the view of education as merely a tool to grow human capital toward seeing it as a force to enable social mobility) are not so new after all. In other words, some of the concepts underlying sustainable development—which is often seen as a relatively recent idea—have been with us through almost the entire post-Independence period, even though they never achieved dominance. This line of argument raises several important questions: Why have the 'alternative' visions been activated in policy only to a limited degree? Why do those with a primarily elitist position remain the decisive actors in determining policy? While this paper does not fully answer these key questions, it does offer insights into the interactions between different visions of educational development as reflected in FDI documentaries, which give us important cues.

While a film production organisation might seem an unlikely place to look for answers to questions about education policy, I argue that the insights generated by analysing FDI's cinematic output are invaluable in tracing some of the key challenges to educational development in post-Independence India. A filmmaking organisation established under the umbrella of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting with direct support from Jawaharlal Nehru in 1948 (Narwekar, 1992), FDI enjoyed wide dissemination of its films through a compulsory exhibition scheme that required cinemas across the country to screen its short documentaries before showing a feature film; this lasted well into the 1980s. FDI provides a unique window into the ideologies of multiple stakeholders within the Indian government, including the political leadership, civil servants and middle-class bureaucrats involved in governing India, as well as filmmakers and artists tasked with inspiring the 'masses' to partake in the development project (Deprez, 2013; Roy, 2002; Sutoris, 2016). By illuminating the visions these groups had for India's education system, I hope to improve our understanding of the reasons for the gap between state rhetoric and education delivery.

The films analysed in this paper point to at least three ideological positions taken by various actors operating within the state, which I refer to as 'visions of elitism,' 'visions of equality' and 'visions of dialogue.' While the first one represents a continuation of colonial ideology that saw education in strictly instrumental terms as a tool for economic development and rested on a continued division of India's populace between the 'masses' and 'elites,' the other two, which were rooted in imperatives of social justice and the tenets of educational philosophies of Gandhi and Tagore, mounted a challenge to this elitism.[7]

Many of the debates central to present-day Indian education policy—such as what to do about elite schools, what the state's responsibilities are in providing a public education system and how to fund quality education that is accessible to all children—echo these earlier tensions between different sets of actors in post-Independence India. The presence of internal contestation in the educational vision of the early postcolonial state debunks simplistic characterisations of the Indian state as an ideological monolith that is prevalent in policy literature (cf. Tilak, 2009). The ideological contradictions at the heart of the newly born Indian state also call attention to the agency of intrastate actors in shaping educational policy and delivery, as recognised in some of the most recent research into the role of state bureaucrats in educational development in India (Mangla, 2017, 2015). These insights allow us to formulate more historically informed answers to the question of why education delivery in India has lagged behind state rhetoric for more than seven decades.

The article has three main goals. First, it seeks to create a methodological innovation by applying a novel method to the study of Indian education—the analysis of government-sponsored documentary film. Second, it aims to analyse critically the ideology shaping education

[3] See Kumar and Sarangapani (2004) for a discussion of the ways in which the term 'quality education' has been used in the Indian context.

[4] One possible reason for this could be the low 'visibility' of education services vis-à-vis other public goods and correspondingly lower pressure by the electorate on politicians to improve education services (cf. Mani and Mukand, 2007).

[5] Research shows, however, that private schools do not usually succeed in improving equity in education; in fact, they often widen the gender gap (Singh and Bangay, 2014; Woodhead et al., 2013). In a comparison of India's and China's public education policies, it was concluded that China's greater emphasis on public education contributed to it having higher enrolment, attendance, graduation rates and gender parity, and a higher proportion of students entering higher education than India—the country with the world's largest private sector in primary and secondary education (Smith and Joshi, 2016).

[6] All the films discussed in this article can be accessed at Films Division's archive in Mumbai, India. Many of the organisation's documentaries are also available online and can be accessed at www.visionsofdevelopment.com and through Films Division's YouTube channel.

[7] Gandhi and Tagore were two of the key education thinkers in the Indian independence movement who challenged the colonial model of education. See Richards (2011) for a detailed analysis of Gandhi's educational thought and Mukherjee (2016) for a study of Tagore's philosophy of education.