

## A Historical Overview of Modern Educational Reforms in India and the USA

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### Abstract

Societal and educational inequalities may be rooted in ethnicity, poverty, being differently abled, or neglect over extended periods of time. The Indian Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE) (2009) and the American No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (2001) are two legislative Acts to address the problem of inequalities in education especially among marginalized populations within a democratic setting. The two Acts arise from long experience in educational reform and are attempts to improve the systems as efficiently and quickly as possible. This article describes the development of both systems of education from their early beginnings. A comparison and analysis of the Acts is made from the perspectives of two countries with very different cultural contexts yet with similar goals of equality. It is a fascinating exercise to see two democratic nations sticking to their cultures, traditions and political frameworks attempt to arrive at a more just and equal society.

**Keywords:** education system, historical overview, educational reforms, the NCLB Act (2001), the RTE (2009)

### Introduction

An education system is not an armed Minerva/Aphrodite springing out of some educationist Jupiter/Jupiter's head, but the result of slow historical progress, more often an evolution than a revolution, an evolution that is no less riveting because it reflects the times and efforts of those involved expansively rather than fleetingly, as in a revolution. Educational system of two democratic nations—India and the USA and the legislative Acts that provide for the education will be the focus of this paper. Education has played a major part in their cultures and nationhood. This article surveys briefly the changes and growth of two educational systems from opposite hemispheres. The systems, while different in structure, have the similar purpose of creating a socially just society. This paper traces the origins and structures of education in the two

nations, focusing on two recently enacted laws: the Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE) (2009) of India and the US No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (2001) (amended in 2015) and currently known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

In education, the terms systemic reform or *systemic improvement* are widely and commonly used by educators, reformers, and others. While educational reforms often target specific elements or components of an education system—such as what students learn or how teachers teach—the concept of systemic reform may be used in reference to (1) reforms that impact multiple levels of the education system, such as elementary, middle, and high school programs; (2) reforms that aspire to make changes throughout a defined system, such as district-wide or statewide reforms; (3)

reforms that are intended to influence, in minor or significant ways, every student and staff member in school or system; or (4) reforms that may vary widely in design and purpose, but that nevertheless reflect a consistent educational philosophy or that are aimed at achieving common objectives (The Glossary of Education Reform, 2013).

### **Indian Education System**

The education system in India can be understood only if it is seen in the context of its ancient history. Down to modern times, education as conceived in ancient India played a central role in the lives of everyone, including the low castes, and very village had a school. A report by William Adam in 1835 records more than a 100,000 schools in Bihar and Bengal alone even before the British turned their attention to educating the masses (Gupta 2006, p. 38). The Government of India's acceptance of the responsibility of public education goes back to the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the Hunter Commission (1882) established a hierarchy of schools and Universities which continues to this day (Agarwal 2006, p.58).

### **Structure of the Indian Education System**

While ancient education began at 7 years of age and finished at 24, the modern system enters a child's life as early as age 3. And the Government seems to be getting progressively ambitious with new subjects introduced at increasingly early ages. English, for example is sought to be introduced in some schools as early as the first grade. The National Policy of 1968 is a landmark that prioritised science and technology in a bid to relate the academy to the society balancing them with the

promotion of a civic and national spirit. This policy created educational infrastructure covering 90% of the country, putting up a school within one kilometer (0.5 miles) radius. In 1966, an Education Commission had linked qualitative and quantitative education with national progress. In 1977, the Government introduced uniformity across the country by introducing the 10+2+3 system with grades I-V as elementary, VI-VIII as middle, IX-X as secondary, and XI-XII as senior secondary leading to a three-year graduation mentioned above. This also made Indian education compatible with the systems the world over. Gender-neutral and vacation-oriented, the focus was on math and science as compulsory subjects leading on to a restructured undergraduate course with Centres for Advanced Studies at the apex involved in research into science and technology and other issues such as social change.

### **Boards of Schools**

There are three main streams in school education in India. Two of these are coordinated at the national level, of which one is under the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) which has the same syllabus taught at uniform pace nation-wide to accommodate children of Federal Government employees who may be transferred from one place to another. The second central scheme is the Indian Certificate of Secondary Education (ICSE). A large number of schools across the country are affiliated to this system managed by a Council. All these are private schools and generally cater to children from wealthy families.

Both the CBSE and the ICSE councils conduct their own examinations in schools

across the country that are affiliated to them at the end of 10 years of schooling (after high school) and again at the end of 12 years (after higher secondary). Admission to the 11th class is normally based on the performance in this all-India examination. Since this puts a lot of pressure on the child to perform well, there have been suggestions to remove the examination at the end of 10 years.

### **Exclusive Schools**

In addition to the above, there are a relatively small number of schools that follow foreign curricula such as the so-called Senior Cambridge. Some of these schools also offer the students the opportunity to sit for the ICSE examinations. Elitist in character, they are remarkable for their astronomically high fees. There are other schools started by visionaries that reject the usual top-down models and teach interactively. They are elitist as well.

### **State Schools**

The States have their own education systems with the local State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) being modelled on and guided by the NCERT. There are schools that are government run and charge nominal fees and cater to the lower classes. Private schools, designed for the urban middle classes, have their own infrastructure and staff and charge a considerably higher fee. Then there are the grant-in-aid schools, private schools that are funded by the Government and are barely distinguishable from the Government schools.

### **Curriculum and Assessment**

The National System of Education based on a National Curricular Framework (NCF), has a flexible common core for

syllabus. This has a nationalistic bent, teaching the Indian freedom struggle with a civic responsibility focus that includes equality, democracy, secularism, and a scientific temper. All educational programmes will be carried on in strict conformity with secular values. In 1976, education became a common state and federal subject with a bias towards the Federal Government. The emphasis was again on marrying education to social needs with excellence at all levels as the aim.

The National Policy on Education (NPE, 1986) proposed the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) with the aim of evolving a national system of education, recommending a core component derived from the vision of national development as enshrined in the Constitution. The Programme of Action (POA, 1992) focused on relevance, flexibility and quality drawing inspiration from the Constitution's vision of India as a secular, egalitarian and pluralistic society, founded on the values of social justice and equality. In the NCF of 2005, education was oriented to strengthen democracy as well as the economy by developing skills needed for a high productivity. Broadly, the aim was to develop an independent and responsible and productive citizenry. To remove the drudgery believed to be set education, the NCF proposed five guiding principles for curriculum development:

(i) Connecting knowledge to practical life outside the school; (ii) eliminating rote methods; (iii) enriching the curriculum to go beyond textbooks; (iv) making examinations more flexible and integrating them with the classroom; and (v) nurturing democracy (NCF, 2005).

The NCF adopted the radical view that knowledge was constructed by the student, and geared the education system to the child's environment and cognitive development. All studies were to be based on the child's environment and abilities to evoke interest in what is being learnt. This was in consonance with the realization that the pedagogic efforts during the primary classes greatly depend on professional planning. In 1986, there was the significant expansion of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), according to which the NCF recommended revision of primary school syllabi and textbooks. Knowledge, not mere information, was the key, and this was obtainable only by a hands-on approach, literally, with the child exposing and examining the world around (Agarwal 2006, p. 258). This requires nothing less than a revolution in Indian education.

While the testing system in India is fairly established, it emphasizes rote learning over an intellectual engagement with a subject, a point of scathing criticism from many quarters. Failure and its consequence, dropping out, are a serious problem at every level. Unlike the US situation, there are no punitive measures in place for poor performance. Noticing that the system focuses only on the end-term examination and evaluates scholastic aptitude of a student, the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) introduced the Continuous Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) system in 2009—initially from classes I-V and extended it later from VI to IX (CBSE, 2009).

The CCE is a system of school based assessment that covers all the aspects of a student's development. It was designed to reduce the students' stress arising out of

the board exams, and to introduce a uniform and comprehensive pattern for student evaluation across the country. It emphasizes two broad objectives: (a) continuity in Evaluation and (b) assessment of broad-based learning. Clearly, it attempts to shift emphasis from 'testing' to 'holistic learning' with an aim of creating young adults, possessing appropriate skills and desirable qualities in addition to academic excellence. The CCE aims at a holistic development of the physical and cognitive skills while making education a joy. Several state boards of education have begun to implement the CCE with a fair degree of success.

### **Teacher certification**

An extensive teacher certification has been the Holy Grail of Indian education, as elusive as it has been an ardently desired. In the mid-sixties, it was sought to be mainstreamed rather than limited to some elite schools; later (in the mid-1980s) a five-year training period was proposed for teachers. One of the Government-appointed committees proposed self-learning with independent thinking as the aims. However, for various reasons ranging from populism to the pressure of circumstances, these have merely remained on paper. The teacher training at the three levels of education remains isolated and insulated from each other. In 1986, the NPE addressed teacher training at the district level resulting in the creation of 250 Colleges of Teacher Education. The National Council of Teacher Education (NCTE) accredits these institutes. Pre-service and in-service were seen to be organically linked. A two-year diploma course for primary teachers and a two-year bachelor's course for secondary education are now on offer. They teach theory and



consolidate it with a practicum and an internship. A Teacher Eligibility Test (TET) ensures standards and uniformity. The latest attempt towards universal education is the RTE which requires the NCTE to establish benchmarks in teacher training; constantly improve these standards; and impress upon all the seriousness of the Government in its educational aims.

The education system in India can be seen as being engaged in a struggle to reach out to people in the lowest rungs of the society. The “Downward Filtration” theory that the British advocated in which a few educated Indians from the upper echelons of society could help percolate education down to the lower levels was a sad failure. One of the few efforts from the grassroots up has been the RTE. To make education compulsory and a Fundamental Right guaranteed by the Constitution seemed the only way out of the impasse. It had to be “justifiable” and anxiety-free” (RTE, 2009). The appropriate infrastructure and teacher training had to be developed, and the private schools too had to play a part by admitting 25% of their students free of cost. A School Management Committee would play an advisory role in government schools. An amendment in 2012 led to the inclusion of differently enabled children and those suffering from cerebral palsy and the like had to be educated through home tutoring. The Act excluded religion-based schools.

### **The American Education System**

The philosophical underpinnings of American education are an interesting mix of the idealistic and the realistic as reflected in the following: the ideal of a democracy that draws its sustenance from the rationality that education brings; the

firm belief that every child is educable; the birthright of every child to education; and the pragmatism that education can improve the value of human labour. These values appear pretty early, even with the Boston Public Latin School founded in 1635. At the time it was legally recognised that education would help read the Bible, which would save souls and keep the Devil away (Old Deluder Law, Massachusetts, 1647)—the nether world and the Other World were as real as the present one. This law raises questions about the centrality of religion in education in the US. It is also, arguably, the inspiration behind the belief that not all subjects are for everybody. The Harvard College, so named in 1638, but founded in 1636, was the first institution addressing the issue of higher education, and like its Boston contemporary, had a heavily classical curriculum. This classical bias was challenged by the pragmatism of Benjamin Franklin whose Philadelphia Academy first attempted to introduce arithmetic, accounts, geometry, astronomy, English, some modern languages, the classics, history, gardening and good breeding (Krug, p.13). The idea of the Academy was to play a major role in education beginning, again, in Massachusetts as the Philips Academy. With three aims would be “the promotion of true Piety and Virtue” along with music, arithmetic, the art of speaking, and thirdly, subjects such as geography among others. Though short-lived, they played an honourable role in education. The concern for the poor runs as a common thread through various measures in education, and as early as 1779, Thomas Jefferson helped found the Free Schools in Virginia. But his schools were free only for three years, presumably because he was more

interested in a rudimentary education. Even more daring was his desire to provide free education and other facilities to students of extraordinary intellect for six years and then again send them for free to William and Mary College (Krug, p.24). In 1805, New York had its first free school. Thus from very early on, the idea of funding the educational institutions lay at the heart of the American education system. In 1787 the Northwest Ordinance came up with the Land-Grant policy. A school would cater to a specified area called the school district first authorized by the Massachusetts law in 1789 which was to be a major component of decentralization. "Probably no other unit has evoked from its constituents so much local fervour and pride," as Krug puts it (p.35). Education during all these times was constantly being revised and redefined. At the Rockfish Gap meeting (1818), Jefferson proposed an education that would create good rulers and judges, so important for the public weal. Moral education was also proposed along with mathematical and physical sciences. Education was also to create independent thinking. Jefferson created an elaborate curriculum, and University of Virginia came into being with Jeffersonian principles including the funding of students who showed extraordinary intellect. The idea of the high school, the next rung in the system, was pioneered in the US once again by Massachusetts (in Boston) in the form of the English High School.

Any educational institution needs reading materials and the year 1836 is a landmark in American education for the publication of the McGuffey readers, so named for its writer William Holmes McGuffey. These

books met the needs of every level of students with appropriate materials ranging from folktales, fables and games to serious literature. It used the devices of drill work, vocabulary definitions, historical and biographical notes (Krug p. 60). Another individual contribution that needs to be noted was that of Horace Mann who tirelessly thought about education and its role as the great leveller between the rich and the poor. More widely accepted was the plan to open graded schools where students could be promoted or detained according to their performance. Massachusetts pioneered junior high schools in 1848. In 1852, the same state introduced compulsory schooling but accepted private tutoring at home, for example. Compulsory education would become meaningful, however, only when the schooling was free, a fact that was not realised until later when the educational institutions expanded. This growing complexity and size education demanded a central authority and the United States Department of Education was created, later to be called an Office in 1867. Its main function was to collect statistics, and reveal the condition of education in the various states. But the important fact about US education was that from the beginning, education was in state hands leading to the later claim of "fifty separate school systems" in operation (Hillway, p.4).

The aims of American education in its formative years (1776) were limited to giving just a sustenance level schooling, and higher education was meant for the very wealthy. High school education took a long time to spread to the masses. Even in 1870, there were only 100 public schools in the US (Krug p. 91). The

Industrial Revolution was a shot in the arm for them, but a significant number of students went to “manual” or vocational schools which were seen as entries to a better life (Krug 115). The uneven standards among schools caused by this immense expansion led to the 1892 National Council of Education that prescribed liberal education for all with subjects ranging from the languages to political economy and the natural sciences, though this invited the charge of an ivory tower education (Krug, p.96).

The growing industrialization of the US required a trained labour force that the growing European immigration could not provide given the state of the schools in the country. The Commission on the reorganization of Secondary Education appointed by the National Education Association came up with the Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education (1918) that prioritized health and the qualities of citizenship along with those of good “home-membership”. It was the basis for the high school education of modern America. The Principles encouraged schools to “experiment” since they were multifaceted including a wide range of aims from personal satisfaction to the dignity of labour (Krug, p.133). The upshot was the “general” studies that fell outside the academic and the vocational. These schools developed productive and standardized citizens without too much of a strain on them. The system served the needs of the time quite satisfactorily a little beyond World War II as American students outperformed those of other nations (Krug, p.133).

US educators suffered their big shocks when the Soviet Union launched the Sputnik and with the rapid rise of

Germany and Japan. Their concern was to improve the 20% of the students at the cutting edge of US education that would win the educational war. Yet, equality in education was soon asserted to make it more inclusive through the Brown vs the Board of Education of Topeka (1954). Test scores replaced counsellors in deciding the careers of students. In 1975, differently abled children got the right to education on par with others (Krug, p.137). The egalitarian strain in US education has always been very strong and assertive; leading on to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965) was designed to make education accessible to everyone. This Act can be traced back to the earlier events beginning in the late 1950s. The belief was that all the human resources of the nation had to be harnessed in the service of the nation especially in light of the growing threat to American supremacy in education. Focusing on poor children, The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) established rules under which funds could be funneled to them. The efforts at reform continued in the form of Presidential initiatives and in 1983 the National Commission of Education produced a report titled *A Nation at Risk* that aroused a serious debate in the wake of new challenges from Asian and European nations that were revitalized by a new education system in the post-War years. It led to a universal rising of standards in the US. The results are debatable, and the progress uneven among schools, more so because the nation has changed more than its educational system. The last word is yet to be said on the subject of better education. But there is a growing demand for new schools as an overwhelming majority of Americans plan to study beyond high

school. Amidst the growing tide of ill-served students, the No Child Left behind (NCLB) 2001 was made to meet the challenges.

The urban school reformers, involving multiple actors at multiple levels, for decades have focused on ways to improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged students. Local school and district based reformers have been assisted by a strikingly large number of federal and state policies that have shifted from targeting individual students for additional assistance through Title I and other similar programs to developing and institutionalizing universal high standards governing teaching and learning for all students, emphasizing schools as the most important sites for change. Many now assert that systemic reform strategies involving national, state, and local policies are required for a long-term change (Aladjem & Borman, p.2).

“The major challenge that states, districts, schools, and teachers now face is building and maintaining the capacity within the newly evolving system to deliver the educational promises of performance-based accountability. The demand for increasing the capacity of the states, districts, schools, and teachers for continuous educational improvement on a wide scale is high and insistent” (Glennan, et.al; p.2). The NCLB was reformed in 2012 and was replaced as Every Student Success Act in 2015.

### **Structure of education system in the US**

Education in the United States follows a pattern similar to that in many systems. Early childhood education is followed by primary school (called elementary school), middle school, secondary school (called

high school), and then postsecondary (tertiary) education. Postsecondary education includes non-degree programs that lead to certificates and diplomas plus six degree levels: associate, bachelor, first professional, master, advanced intermediate, and research doctorate. The US system does not offer a second or higher doctorate, but does offer post-doctorate research programs. Adult and continuing education, plus special education, cut across all educational levels (US Department of Education, 2008).

The United States has a decentralized education system based upon its federal Constitution, which reserves power over education to the states and local authorities, as well as to individual schools and higher education institutions. While the federal government has a very limited role in running the U.S. education system, it does provide important policy leadership and provides assistance in support of education throughout the nation (US Department of Education, 2008).

### **Teacher Training**

Initially teachers were chosen from among the local persons with some knowledge and a good character. But as standards grew, they were expected to spend longer years training to teach in higher classes. The importance given to quality teaching requires training and the first of the “normal” schools was opened in Lexington, Massachusetts in 1839, even before teacher education was made compulsory (Krug p. 67). These schools often offered the hands-on skills needed in the class, and did not certify teachers in the way that is understood now. It was only towards the end of the nineteenth century that these schools offered



baccalaureate degrees. The college of education appeared on the scene after World War I, and extended the range of subjects that were taught in school and colleges. Other universities and colleges also began to offer these degrees in teacher training. American education had travelled a long way from the days of simple rote learning to an increasingly sophisticated art and science that teaching now is claimed to be.

### **The NCLB and the RTE Acts of the USA and India**

The RTE Act (2009) and the NCLB (2001) run parallel in many important ways, both in principles and practices. They are, to begin with, products of a long history and mixed results attempting to meet the demands of a fast changing world—they were oriented to the future with a welfare commitment. The huge investments made in them and the high stakes involved make comparison rewarding.

The universalization of education has long been an ideal for both nations. Beyond this, the area becomes contentious as the ideals and implications underpinning them have been debated hotly. While the Indian side had various committees such as the one headed by Acharya Ramamurthi (1989) that recommended that education should be free and compulsory for children up to the age of 14 leading on the RTE, the American ESEA of 1965 proposed equal access to education. The idea of accountability, feared and hated by many teachers, governs school activity.

The ESEA was more comprehensive than the RTE in including the differently abled in its purview even in the mid-sixties, an important section of the people neglected

by the latter (the RTE) until 2012. It was a constellation of programs that were funded and managed in schools that were deemed to meet standards fixed by it to meet difficult and debilitating challenges in the form of mobility, poverty, learning difficulties, and disabilities. The ESEA evolved into the NCLB that lowered standards and, focusing on results, established a pass-fail regime across the board that seemed to ignore social and individual variations. It is no surprise that such programs are by their very nature, works in progress. Thus the Obama Administration took measures to ensure that good teachers and principals are accessible to every class; connecting with parents to partner improvements in the learners, and preparing them for higher education. The lowest performing schools received special attention in the form of funds and other interventions. Keeping within the law, the Administration mitigated the top-down structure by allowing states a conditional flexibility to work out easy to narrow gaps, and improve teaching. This also takes out some of the sting from the charge that the NCLB is a one-size-fits-all kind of program. The states are also free to design programs that are appropriate for their students. Transparency retains its priority. This includes the scores being made public by race and income.

One crucial point on which the two measures focus is the prevention of school-dropouts, and the improvement of the school performance. School dropouts can join the school they want under both Acts, a flexibility that is truly commendable to stem this problem. Reading is the single most important area

that the NCLB focuses on, just as the RTE does.

The central aspect of teacher training is a highpoint of both the Acts. Teachers reaching a certain level are regarded as “Highly Qualified”. The RTE, for its part, prescribes minimum qualifications for teachers in teaching skills, the goals that the Act sets include minimum quality and content and the processes of pedagogy. With a view to assess academic performance, the RTE relies on the CCE while the NCLB relies on the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) scores. Thus both of them are keen on obtaining measurable results, making them conditional for continued aid. The democratic aspects of this include the freedom for parents to move their wards to other schools if the present one does not meet standards for two consecutive years. Punitive measures include the reduction of administrative authority, external supervision, and restructuring the school organization. Thus, the schools have high stakes in the performance of the students.

The ethnic aspect in the form of minorities or backward groups is one of the prime movers of both educational measures. The lower castes and tribes, included in one of the Schedules of the Indian Constitution, and therefore called Scheduled Castes and Tribes, along with the minorities take up a major part of the RTE’s aims. The NCLB has an equivalent focus in its special demographic groups, ethnic and racial populations, LEP students, the economically deprived, and students with other disabilities. The attempt to realize these aims is sought to be guaranteed by the much reviled and hated word accountability that has no less than seven tiers to it ranging from students to the state

itself. However, the punitive actions (reducing administrative control of school officials, for example) that the NCLB has in its quiver are not available in such a huge range under the RTE, though, as mentioned above, Andhra Pradesh has some measures in place. There are tests at regular intervals for the students, but evaluation is an internal affair, and, therefore, not reliable. The Act also decrees that private schools meet specified standards within three years or be subjected to heavy fines and even closure.

The system allows for some freedom within strictly controlled templates. The RTE Act appoints an Academic Authority, in this case the NCERT, to decide what shall be taught in the schools. Accordingly, the Council has prepared the NCF 2005 that stipulates a learner-focused curriculum within which the states are free to design their own curricula. In contrast, the US system has no place for Federal control, with the states setting their own standards, and the institutions teaching these need to be licensed. The goal towards which the two Acts direct all these efforts were in the case of the US, the achievement of the proficient level or above by the end of 2013-2014, and in the case of India, the achievement of 100% enrolment by 2014. As always in such massive endeavours, the attempts—the Acts—have been, like the curate’s egg, good in parts and the successes, while encouraging, have not been even up to the potential. It only means that the efforts will have to continue.

### **Conclusion**

The striking similarities between the two Acts, in spite of some significant differences, affirm the fact that the goals

and the measures to achieve them show a lot of similarities. It can be seen that the in surveying the student population in need of special attention are similar in both nations. The responsibilities taken up by the respective Governments arise from their democratic traditions and aspirations to take their rightful places in what is commonly called the “comity of nations” in a world that is ever changing and unpredictable. In the classroom itself, both nations aim at raising standards to make students productive members socially and personally. The range of strategies that are deployed are far from perfect, but the endeavour of the two nations to improve and move on are worthy of admiration

despite the sharp and often germane criticism that they face. While the task is massive and the time needed is long, the two schemes show the grit and the determination to conquer these.

If education has to be a joy, then it must also be viewed as an end in itself. This does not rule out the social gains, that can and ought to be an aim of all those who are involved in education. But there is an uneasy feeling that is inescapable the fact that education is seen as mere step towards the final destination of economic prosperity. Thus, the RTE seems to have been at least in part, enacted as means of attaining the Millennium Development Goals (Dahlman and Utz, 2005, p.2)

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