Transformation and Tracing the Historical Evolution of the Indian Education System

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ABSTRACT

Education in India has a rich history dating back to ancient times. The traditional Indian education system focuses not only on academic subjects but also on moral, spiritual, and physical development in a holistic education. However, the invasion of foreign powers and subsequent socio-political changes led to a decline in these institutions. The British colonial rule in India, starting from the 18th century, brought about a substantial transformation in the education system. The British introduced a formal education system, primarily to produce clerks and civil servants to serve their administrative needs. After India gained independence in 1947, efforts were made to restructure the education system to meet the requirements of a newly independent nation. The government prioritized the establishment of a comprehensive educational infrastructure, including schools, colleges, and universities, to promote literacy and knowledge dissemination across the country. Several educational commissions were set up to formulate policies and implement reforms to address issues of access, equity, and quality in education.

Key words: Education system, Ancient India, Medieval period, UGC, NEP.

INTRODUCTION

The educational legacy in the Indian subcontinent originated with the teaching of traditional disciplines such as Indian religions, mathematics, and logic in early Hindu and Buddhist centers of learning, including the ancient Takshashila (located in present-day Pakistan) and Nalanda (in India). The influence of Islamic education became embedded with the rise of Islamic empires in the region during the middle Ages. Subsequently, the advent of European powers introduced Western-style education to colonial India. The era of British colonial rule in the 19th century witnessed the establishment of numerous Western-style universities. A series of initiatives carried out over the first half of the 20th century laid the groundwork for the educational systems of the Republic of India, Pakistan, and other regions within the Indian subcontinent.

Education unlocks a realm of opportunities for individuals, granting them empowerment through knowledge. It involves the nurturing of learning through diverse means. While attending a formal school and learning from educators is a prevalent method, education transcends these boundaries. At its core, education fosters exploration and creativity. Throughout our lives, we continuously absorb information, whether through conscious effort or subconscious assimilation. Education encompasses the broad spectrum of acquiring knowledge, values, skills, habits, and beliefs.

I. Ancient Indian Education System

Education in India has a rich history dating back to ancient times. In ancient times, two distinct education systems, Vedic and Buddhist, emerged [1]. The Vedic system utilized Sanskrit as its medium of instruction, while the Buddhist system employed Pali. Education primarily revolved around the teachings of Vedas, Brahmanas, Upanishads, and Dharmasutras [2]. The foundational aim was to foster not only physical development but also inner growth, emphasizing virtues like humility, honesty, discipline, self-reliance, and reverence for all living beings. Instruction took place in various settings, including ashrams, Residentials, temples, and homes, often beneath the open sky, fostering a sense of freshness and vitality. The Residential education system, a residential model, functioned within the Guru's household or "Acharya," serving as the educational hub. Discipline and hard work formed the core principles, with students expected to assimilate knowledge from their gurus and apply it in practical life. The student-teacher

relationship held a sacred significance, typically involving Gurudakshina (a token of gratitude) rather than formal fees. Originating in the Vedic age, this system centered on skill-based learning grounded in the Vedas, Puranas, and sacred texts, which served as vital resources for expanding students' knowledge. Notably, women's education gained emphasis during the early Vedic period. The educational focus encompassed both physical and mental development, with a typical course duration of 10-12 years, students relied on memory, making it a critical aspect of the learning process [3]. Education occurred in serene forest settings, fostering a peaceful and conducive learning environment away from normal life.

Promoting a value-based approach within the Residential system can cater to the unique strengths of each child, fostering their excellence in specific areas of interest. Drawing inspiration from the ancient Indian educational system, emphasis can be placed on nurturing a creative, ethical, and inquisitive mindset that prioritizes not just external progress but, more significantly, the inner transformation of human consciousness.

Takshashila gained renown as a prominent hub for disseminating Buddhist teachings. Its comprehensive curriculum encompassed a broad spectrum, including the study of sciences, arts, law, scriptures, and both religious and secular medicine. It is documented that Takshashila welcomed over ten thousand students from various parts of the world, alongside Indian scholars. Even during the Mauryan period, Taxila continued to serve as a significant center for learning. Similarly, Nalanda University offered an extensive array of courses, covering almost the entirety of the knowledge available at that time. Alongside the study of the Vedas, students at Nalanda received training in fine arts, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, politics, and the art of warfare [4].

Vikramashila, founded by the Pala emperor Dharmapala between 783 and 820 AD, emerged as a response to perceived intellectual decline at the renowned Nalanda . Unfortunately, its existence was cut short by the invading forces of Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khalji in 1193. While Vikramashila's historical accounts primarily stem from Tibetan sources, particularly the works of Tāranātha, the 16th–17th-century Tibetan monk historian, its legacy remains significant.

It is renowned as one of the largest Buddhist universities of its time, Vikramashila boasted a faculty of over one hundred teachers and attracted nearly one thousand students. The institution produced distinguished scholars who were frequently sought after by foreign nations to disseminate Buddhist knowledge, culture, and spirituality. Notably, Atisha Dipankara, a pivotal figure in the Sarma traditions of Tibetan Buddhism, was among the esteemed scholars associated with Vikramashila. The university curriculum encompassed an array of subjects, including philosophy, grammar, metaphysics, and Indian logic, among others. However, the focal point of learning centered around Buddhist tantra, underscoring Vikramashila's significance as a center for the propagation and advancement of Buddhist scholarship and spiritual teachings [5].

II. Medieval Educational System

The medieval period in India, spanning from the 10th century A.D. to the middle of the eighteenth century, was marked by significant changes brought about by foreign invasions and the establishment of various foreign cultures in the Indian subcontinent. With the introduction of foreign rulers and traders, Indian society underwent a transformative phase where diverse cultural interactions and exchanges became prominent. In this milieu, the education system in medieval India underwent a profound shift.

With the advent of the Mughal rule in the 11th century, the establishment of elementary and secondary schools became prevalent. This development culminated in the founding of universities in cities such as Delhi, Lucknow, and Allahabad. The educational landscape experienced a fusion of Indian and Islamic traditions, fostering advancements in various fields of knowledge, including theology, religion, philosophy, fine arts, painting, architecture, mathematics, medicine, and astronomy.

Before the arrival of Muslim rulers in India, a well-developed education system already existed. However, the medieval period witnessed the establishment of formal institutions of learning. Urban education was promoted by Muslim rulers through the establishment of libraries and literary societies. Primary schools (maktabs) were set up to teach basic reading, writing, and Islamic prayers, while secondary schools (madrasas) aimed to impart advanced language skills and religious education. These madrasas were established by Sultans, nobles, and influential individuals, with the goal of training scholars for civil services and judicial roles.

The education system during medieval India was overseen by the Ulama, who adhered to the curriculum prescribed by Akbar. While education was primarily focused on religious training, subjects such as medicine, Arabic literature,

grammar, and philosophy were also incorporated into the curriculum [6]. Notably, Arab and Central Asian educational models influenced the Indian education system during both the medieval and early modern periods. The flourishing of education during the Mughal rule was followed by the introduction of English education by the British during the later medieval era. With the arrival of European missionaries, Western education gained traction, leading to the establishment of numerous universities and colleges, thus bolstering the popularity of education during the medieval period [7].

III. British Colonial Influence on Education

The influence of British colonialism on education in India was marked by significant developments that reshaped the educational landscape. Prior to the early 19th century, the influence of English education was limited, with only sporadic efforts by missionaries and individual initiatives. Notable contributions include Schwartz's schools in Tanjore, Ramnad, and Shivganga, the Baptist Missionaries in Serampore, and the London Mission Society [8]. These efforts, along with the advocacy of individuals like Charles Grant and William Wilberforce, prompted the East India Company to relinquish its non-intervention policy in education. The Charter Act of 1813 played a pivotal role as it compelled the Company to allocate a substantial sum for education, although the funds were primarily used to promote Indian languages and literature. The establishment of the General Committee of Public Instruction in 1823 marked a significant step in overseeing the development of education. However, the committee, dominated by the Orientalist group, emphasized the promotion of oriental learning over Western education.

A shift in policy occurred with the advocacy of Anglicists like Macaulay and Lord Bentinck, leading to the promotion of European literature and science among the Indian populace. This shift culminated in Bentinck's directive to focus solely on English education. Subsequent initiatives, including the recommendations of Auckland, resulted in the establishment of more English colleges across various regions. The Macaulay Minute on Education, introduced by Thomas Babington Macaulay in 1835, emphasized the necessity of an education system grounded in contemporary Western values and methodologies, diverging from the traditional Indian approach. Macaulay argued that the prevailing Indian educational system was antiquated and failed to address the requirements of a modern, industrial society. Consequently, his proposal paved the way for the establishment of a modern education framework in India, influenced by Western principles and practices.

The Wood's Despatch of 1854, introduced by Sir Charles Wood, became a seminal document guiding the education program in India. This period also witnessed the establishment of universities in Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras in 1857, laying the groundwork for the expansion of modern education. Alongside official endeavors, missionary institutions played a role in disseminating Western knowledge, although their primary aim was to propagate Christianity. Many key figures such as David Hare, J.E.D. Bethune, and Vidyasagar played instrumental roles in promoting education, particularly women's education, with institutions like Hindu College in Calcutta and similar institutions in Bombay and Madras contributing to the spread of English education. By the 1850s, the foundations of modern education were firmly established in most provinces in India, setting the stage for further educational expansion under British colonial rule.

The Hunter Education Commission, established in 1882 during the era of Viceroy Lord Ripon, aimed to address several key issues. Tasked with investigating the lack of implementation of the Wood's Despatch of 1854, the commission delved into the prevailing state of elementary education in British territories. Its primary objective was to propose effective measures for the expansion and enhancement of the educational system. The commission was chaired by Sir William Wilson Hunter, and its report was submitted in the same year, 1882 [9].

The Sergeant Plan of Education, introduced in 1944 under the direction of Sir John Sargent, aimed to revolutionize the state of education in India, drawing inspiration from earlier efforts such as the Government of India Resolution of 1913, the Sadler Commission Report of 1917, and the Hartog Committee Report of 1929 [10]. Designed to be a comprehensive scheme, the plan set a target for achieving educational standards comparable to those recognized in England within a 40-year timeframe. The plan's primary objectives encompassed the establishment of universal primary education, with a focus on enhancing accessibility, enrollment rates, compulsory education, school expansion, curriculum reforms, teacher training, and community involvement. Despite the plan's potential to transform the Indian education system, it encountered numerous obstacles during the later years of British control and the subsequent partition of India, limiting its successful implementation.

Despite these challenges, the Sergeant Plan served as a catalyst for future educational reforms in independent India, influencing conversations about the nation's educational progress and the pursuit of universal primary education. Its

principles and goals laid the groundwork for subsequent educational initiatives, leaving a lasting legacy in the country's educational development.

In 1937, following the establishment of provincial governments with native representation in seven provinces, significant attention was devoted to educational reforms. A pivotal moment occurred in October 1937, with the convening of the all-India National Educational Conference in Wardha. During this conference, a resolution was adopted, endorsing Mahatma Gandhi's proposal for the implementation of free and compulsory education for seven years, to be conducted in the mother tongue across the nation. Additionally, it was recommended that the educational process during this period should integrate manual and productive work. Consequently, a committee chaired by Dr. Zakir Hussain was appointed to further this vision. The Committee diligently formulated the first comprehensive national education scheme, presenting its report on December 2, 1937. This proposal, commonly referred to as the Wardha Scheme or Basic Education, laid the foundation for a transformative approach to education in India, emphasizing holistic development and practical learning methodologies.

IV. Post-Independence Education Reforms

Upon India's independence from British rule on August 15, 1947, the nation had the opportunity to shape its educational policy to meet the evolving needs of the country in the rapidly changing times. The establishment of the University Education Commission, popularly known as the Radhakrishnan Commission (1948-49) represented a significant milestone in defining the objectives and direction of higher education in independent India. Chaired by Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the Commission was tasked with studying the challenges within the university education system and proposing reforms that aligned with the aspirations of the populace [11].

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, the Minister of Education, Natural Resources, and Scientific Research, inaugurated the University Grants Commission on December 28, 1953. Subsequently, in November 1956, the UGC (University Grants Commission) was formally established as a statutory body by the Indian Parliament under the 'University Grants Commission Act, 1956. Functioning as a statutory organization of the Government of India, the UGC was tasked with coordinating, determining, and upholding standards of teaching, examination, and research in university education [12, 13, 14, 15].

During the initial Five Year Plans, allocations for education were a significant portion of the total plan outlay, emphasizing the government's commitment to the sector. However, in subsequent plans, the percentage of total outlay allocated for education experienced fluctuations, with a notable decline in the Ninth Plan. To streamline the education system, the government implemented the recommendations of the Kothari Commission under the 'National Policy on Education' in 1968. Key recommendations included the promotion of universal primary education [16], the introduction of a new pattern of education, the implementation of the three-language formula, the integration of regional languages in higher education, the development of agricultural and industrial education, and the promotion of adult education [17].

The development of secondary education in independent India also witnessed significant advancements through the recommendations of the Mudaliar Committee, also known as the Secondary Education Commission, led by Dr. A Laxman Swami Mudaliar in 1952-53. This committee played a crucial role in assessing the existing secondary education system and advocating measures for its enhancement. The contributions of the Kothari Committee, led by D. Kothari, further strengthened the development of the education system in India, addressing various facets of education and providing guidance to the government in its advancement implemented as Kothari Commission (1964-66).

National Education Policy-I (1968) marked a significant step forward in the improvement of the Indian education sector, following the recommendations of the Kothari Commission. It introduced a National School System, ensuring access to education for all students, irrespective of their background. Additionally, it implemented a uniform education structure (10+2+3) across the nation, fostering national harmony and integration. The policy emphasized the use of regional languages in secondary schools to facilitate effective communication between teachers and students. However, its success was limited due to issues such as inadequate implementation, insufficient funding, and limited central authority.

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, the National Education Policy (1986) aimed to modernize and integrate Information Technology into the education sector. It focused on the restructuring of teacher education, early childhood care, adult literacy, and women's empowerment. The policy's success was attributed to its introduction following the 42nd amendment in 1976, which transferred education to the concurrent list, granting the central government the authority to implement various programs. Notably, several significant government initiatives, including

the Mid Day Meal Scheme, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Kendriya Vidyalaya, Navodaya Vidyalaya, and the incorporation of IT in education, were launched under this policy [18,19].

The New Education Policy 2020 represents a fundamental shift from the 1986 policy. Approved under the chairmanship of Mr. Narendra Modi, it introduced a "5+3+3+4" structure, aiming to provide formal schooling from early childhood to the secondary level. The policy emphasizes teaching in regional languages or the mother tongue until the fifth grade and seeks to achieve 100% Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) in school education. Notable initiatives under the NEP 2020 include the introduction of engineering programs in regional languages, the establishment of an academic bank of credit for flexible higher education, and guidelines for the internationalization of higher education [20]. These policies, along with the efforts of various committees and commissions, have contributed significantly to the growth and transformation of India's education sector, leading to increased literacy rates and a substantial rise in student enrollments in colleges and universities.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of the Indian education system over the centuries reflects a rich tapestry of cultural, social, and political influences that have shaped the educational landscape. From the ancient period characterized by the Gurukul system and the emphasis on holistic development, to the medieval era marked by the introduction of Islamic and Mughal educational institutions, the Indian education system has witnessed a diverse array of influences and advancements.

The British colonial period brought about significant changes with the introduction of Western education, leading to the establishment of universities and colleges, albeit with a focus on English education and a shift away from traditional systems. Post-independence, India embarked on a journey of educational reform, seeking to balance traditional values with the demands of a rapidly modernizing world. Various educational policies and commissions, such as the Kothari Commission and the National Education Policy, played a crucial role in shaping the contemporary education system and fostering literacy and educational accessibility across the country.

The Indian education system has continually evolved to meet the needs of a diverse and dynamic population, emphasizing the importance of inclusivity, skill development, and innovation. While challenges persist, efforts to promote a balanced and comprehensive approach to education have contributed to India's growth as a global knowledge hub. As the country progresses, the emphasis on preserving cultural heritage while embracing modern educational methodologies remains a cornerstone in the ongoing development of the Indian education system.

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