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BOOK REVIEW

India's education paradox: National policies and regional insights

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Jandhyala B. G. Tilak[1,2]

From the lopsided tiny colonial education system inherited by India from the British in 1947, India has made spectacular progress in terms of expansion of education – enrolments, number of schools, colleges, universities and teachers. According to the latest statistics available from the Ministry of Education, the net enrolment ratio in primary education is around 100 per cent, in upper primary level it is around 95 per cent, in secondary education the gross enrolment ratio is above 50 per cent, and in higher education it is 28 per cent (GoI 2022, 2023). More than 300 million students are taught by nearly one million teachers in schools, colleges and universities (ibid.). With about 1.5 million educational institutions at all levels put together, including 1,200 universities and 45,000 colleges, the Indian school system is one of the largest and the higher education system the second largest in the world (ibid.). In addition, while there are several impressive achievements, the inherited colonial education system was not transformed into an Indian system after independence, as the author of this book notes, rather casually. The same colonial system continues. This remains one of the most conspicuous failures of independent India, which the *National Education Policy 2020* (GoI 2020) aims to correct.

The figures quoted above are national aggregates and averages. But "the national average is often misleading" when the distribution is critically inequitable (p. xxi), as Debdas Banerjee rightly notes in his introduction. In fact, this is his main concern, as "inequality in education contributes the most to overall inequality" (p. 4). Inequalities in education are characterised in India by many different socioeconomic and demographic differences such as social category (caste and religion), gender, region (inter-state, intra-state and rural–urban), and,

✉ Jandhyala B. G. Tilak
jtilak2017@gmail.com

[1] Council for Social Development, New Delhi, India

[2] Kautilya School of Public Policy, Hyderabad, India

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most importantly, economic class, i.e. differences between the poor and the rich. *Inter alia*, Banerjee emphasises regional inequalities in education, the low performance of the system, and the inadequacy of policies in addressing these aspects. Broadly focusing on these and other select aspects, he offers a general critique of educational policies and educational developments that have taken place during the last decade or two in India. Banerjee attempts to examine the policies in the "principal-agency model" (p. 6), the principal being the state/institutions, and the agency being students/households/organisations, human capital versus human capability approaches, and the paradigms of justice and efficiency.

Like quite a few critics, Banerjee finds the emergence of human capital theory in the early 1960s to be the main source for the current wave of commercialisation of education and that the theory advocated "state minimalism" (p. 8). But while it focused on economic gains, the human capital theory has not argued against state funding or in favour of state minimalism. On the contrary, empirical research in the human capital framework has also justified public funding of education, as many scholars (e.g. McMahon 2002, 2006, 2010) have emphasised the externalities that education produces. Some (e.g. Tilak, 2004, 2008) have highlighted the role of education as a public good, and a merit good, which would justify liberal public funding. Further, while the normal economic rates of return are good enough to vindicate public funding, the "true" social returns on investment in education, whenever estimated, were higher than private returns, albeit in only a few cases (McMahon 2010). Such estimates of true or "wide" returns are rare because of the difficulty of monetising the external effects (Münich and Psacharopoulos 2018). But the very recognition of externalities constitutes a sufficient basis for liberal public funding of education.

After briefly discussing a few conceptual issues such as public good, merit good, "social" good, equality, equity and efficiency in Chapter 2, Banerjee examines the empirical situation in Chapters 3 and 4 with the help of some of the familiar statistical indicators of education such as enrolment ratios, dropout rates, transition rates, pupil–teacher ratios, gender parity, mean years of schooling, household expenditure and government expenditure in a few states. In these chapters he also examines the relationships between inputs into schools and outputs, and also between mean years of schooling and other indicators and poverty and household income – all with cross-section data on states in India in 2011–2012.

Broadly under the theme of the capabilities approach, in Chapter 5 Banerjee refers to the *Right to Education Act* (RTE) (GoI 2009), "choice" of schools, closure of schools, choice of special education, and English language teaching. The value and place accorded to vocational education is critically reviewed in Chapter 6. While highlighting the importance of skills, the author rightly argues that basically, schools should be given autonomy in curriculum development in such a way that they can achieve a proper but varyingly appropriate mix of academic and vocational education/skills. Noting the overall growth of higher education in Chapter 7, he highlights the uneven distribution of enrolments, colleges and universities, widely varying gross enrolment ratios between different states, and between different population groups, particularly the marginalised sections – the

Scheduled castes, Scheduled tribes, "other backward classes" (OBCs) and the others, and the disproportionate distribution of public resources.

With the help of evidence from a few selected states, the author makes a few important familiar and not-so-familiar observations: the disproportionate distribution of public resources is the reason for the unequal conditions of educational facilities across states; fees paid by the students and the quality of the educational institution are not necessarily related; low fees in a state are associated with high enrolment growth; the higher the pupil–teacher ratio in a state, the higher the percentage of students taking private tuition, familiarly known as private coaching, etc. Banerjee stresses the importance of inclusive policies that would promote equity and quality in higher education. The last chapter on "Fiscal possibilities" focuses on a few issues on fiscal federalism, financing of education, and the Union-state responsibilities in the Indian federal framework. Apart from considering the issues of centralisation and standardisation, the author pleads for the recognition of unequal fiscal abilities and better funding relationships in the framework of the proclaimed principle of cooperative federalism. Given that education is a Concurrent subject in the Constitution of India, as per the 42nd amendment to the Constitution made in 1976 (see GOI 2024), both the Union and State governments have the responsibility for expansion as well as for equity and quality of education. Since the focus of this book is on regional dimensions, the author could also have examined a few specific education policies made at state level.

The absence of government or government-aided private schools in a geographical location may be seen as a compulsion on the parents/children to go to a private school (p. 135). But as public (state-funded) schools are available in most geographical locations within walking distance or so for most students, the demand for private schooling in the case of a vast majority of the population is, as I have argued elsewhere (Tilak 2023), an "individual choice" influenced by the medium of instruction, which is mostly English, and, more importantly, the social prestige and status attached to attending private schools. I feel that individual choice of private schools and choice of English as the medium of instruction are indeed aberrations to the principle of social/public choice. They also go against the idea of a common school system, the spirit of the RTE Act in India, and "Education for All" – universal basic education proposed by UNESCO and others (WCEFA 1990).

Perhaps one of the weakest points in the RTE Act (GoI 2009) is the provision of a 25 per cent quota of seats in private schools for economically disadvantaged children. The rationale that at least 25 per cent of the poor will be able to access quality education is an admission on the part of the State that (a) the quality of education in government schools is poor; (b) more importantly, it cannot be improved: and (c) hence, private schooling needs to be promoted. All are indeed questionable and even dangerous assumptions. Without necessarily questioning such aspects, and taking the RTE Act as given, many scholars, including Banerjee, argue for better and strict implementation of the provisions of the Act in this regard, though it causes further growth of private schools. Of course, private schools have different reasons for not strictly implementing it.

There is a substantial amount of literature on many of the issues covered in this book. Banerjee states that the aim of his book is "to articulate a framework for

reforms, which would play *substantive* roles rather than stay on as merely *instrumental*" (p. 6; italics in original). While some suggestions are made, they are general and not particularly new, some of them have indeed been implemented for quite some time (such as deferring examinations until the end of lower secondary), and some require thorough discussion. For example, the rationale behind the proposed reduction in the duration of compulsory education (p. 25) is not clear. In India it is currently eight years (age 6–14), while in many other countries, it is much longer, covering between nine and twelve years of schooling. There is a strong argument for extending the RTE Act to secondary and higher secondary levels of education in India. The *Draft National Education Policy* (GoI 2019) also proposes this. International comparisons would provide valuable insights on such aspects. Banerjee does make comparisons of India with Finland, China and the Republic of Korea, but they are confined to comparing merely the structure of education system – e.g. the number of years of each level of education – not the policies, practices and experiences, which could provide valuable lessons to learn.

Banerjee creates high hopes for the readers in the initial chapters by raising a few key theoretical and conceptual issues along with a few empirical aspects, when he proposes to discuss, for example, certain issues in Amartya Sen's framework of human capabilities (Sen 1979, 1985). But both in the conceptual and theoretical framework and in empirical details, the discussion is not very profound. While one enjoys reading the book, many readers might also feel it is somehow incomplete. The absence of a critical account of the educational policies in India and growth of education, the haphazard selection of issues, the limited database (foregoing the very large database available on many of the selected issues), and a lack of depth in analysis of issues and evidence is somewhat disappointing. Apart from highlighting some not entirely unknown regional variations in educational development, the book may fail to excite its readers.

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