

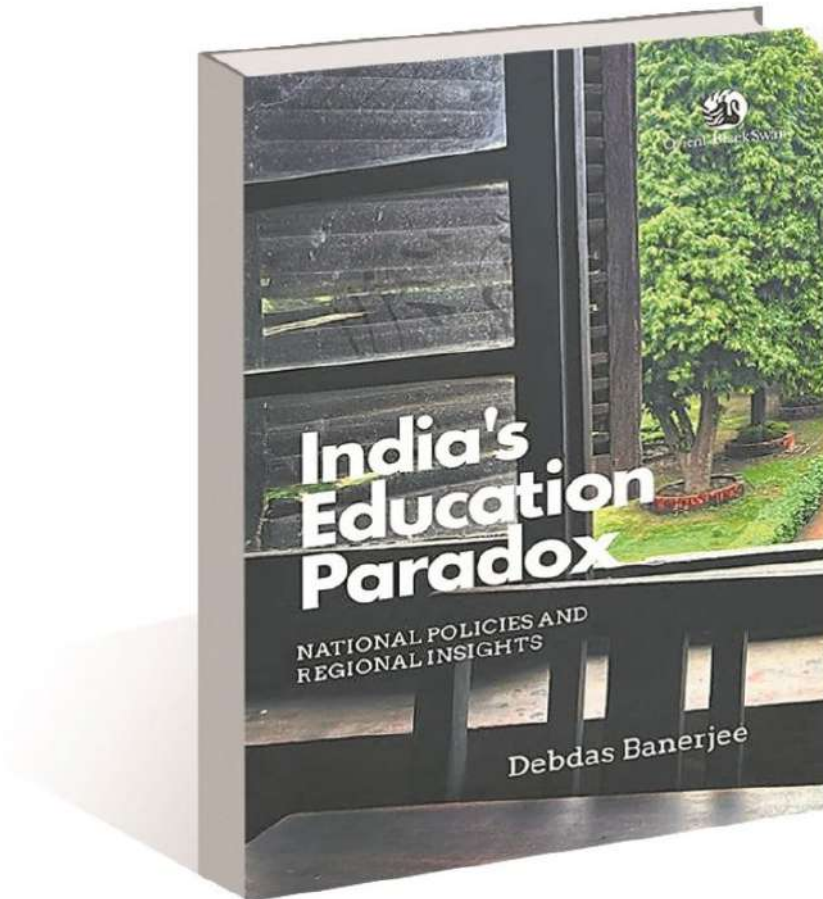
[Home](#) / [Book Reviews](#) / Why equality and quality remain elusive in educational planning

Why equality and quality remain elusive in educational planning

Debdas Banerjee's book 'India's Education Paradox: National Policies and Regional Insights' critiques the state of education in view of the regional imbalances and the intent of national educational policies

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India's Education Paradox by Debdas Banerjee. Orient BlackSwan. Pages 328. ~1,610

Book Title: India's Education Paradox

Author: Debdas Banerjee

The elusive triangle of equality, quality and quantity in Indian education, explained by JP Naik in the mid-Seventies, remains out of reach even today. Education in India operates in a landscape marked by striking social and economic inequalities. This gives rise to uneven educational access across the regions and adversely impacts the standard of education at all levels. The national educational indicators in the form of averages give a broader picture, but significant divergence of different states is crucial for educational planning. Debdas Banerjee's book 'India's Education Paradox: National Policies and Regional Insights' critiques the state of education in view of the regional imbalances and the intent of national educational policies. It argues for alternative analytical models to understand the inter-state variations between educational indicators.

A Fulbright post-doctoral fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he divides the book into three sections. The first explains the issues and perspectives on the concepts of equity and equality in education. The book engages with the question of considering education as a public, private or a merit good and justifies public intervention 'on the grounds of market failures, delivery of equity and building social cohesion'. Juxtaposing John Rawl's concept of justice as fairness and equality of opportunity approach and Amartya Sen's human capability formation approach, the book emphasises that equality in education needs to be viewed in terms of the equality of capability or reduction of incapability.

The second section, devoted to school education and related reforms, examines the demand and supply side factors determining the disparity in school education development. A detailed analysis of the data reveals many a paradox. For instance, mean years of schooling and income inequality or poverty ratio have inconclusive correlation; the dropout ratio of persons in 5-29 years' age group is generally lower in lower quintile of expenditure or income. These findings being contrary to the popular perceptions necessitate a comprehensive structured inquiry to understand the phenomenon of exclusion — apparent and silent.

Another issue relates to the opportunities and choices generally made by those sitting on the margins of the social and economic fence. Their first choice remains government schools. However, in the name of cost-effectiveness and rationalisation, that choice is frustrated when the schools are either closed or merged for want of enough student enrolment. The paucity of funds makes government schools adopt the shortcuts of appointing casual teachers regardless of the implications on the learning outcomes. Building the capability of the students to reflect and imagine gets replaced by the mechanical 'teach to test' approach, disturbing the foundation of the education system.

The book traces the policy initiatives regarding vocational education and training, and observes that the enrolment in such programmes has been very poor at school and higher education levels. However, it is also mindful of the dangers of overemphasising education as a trade education. A comparison of countries with varying 'state-market' configuration with respect to vocational education and training, such as Finland, China and South Korea, is educative in this regard.

The third section delineates the policy perspectives on higher education and the disproportionalities therein. Banerjee critiques the policy of instituting world-class higher education institutions with liberal fiscal resources and likens it with creating 'islands in the ocean of mediocrity', whereas the need is to strengthen all the institutions to perform the task of developing intellectual human resource, ensuring social equity and regional equality. The steady decline in the Academic Freedom Index indicates erosion of academic freedom, leaving higher education institutions in a subordinated position. A series of guidelines for higher education institutions originating from the University Grants Commission in quick succession further creates a perception of tight control. There seems to be a design of centralisation and homogenisation as evident from the mandate of the National

Testing Agency, entrusted with conducting entrance test examinations for undergraduate and graduate admissions and fellowships in higher education institutions.

The grant of autonomy as envisaged by the policy to uplift academic standards settles down to the autonomy of raising the course fees. Escalation of the cost of education makes it tougher for the young from poor households to avail of higher education, defeating the aim of raising the gross enrolment ratio. Financing of higher education is a major issue where the Centre and states need to shoulder the responsibility collectively. Fiscal inefficiency, as the author notes, results from dilution of federalism.

Banerjee has made this volume rich in data and profound in analysis, thanks to the research undertaken by him as Senior Fellow at the Indian Council of Social Science Research, hosted by the Institute of Development Studies, Kolkata. This book will be of great interest to academicians across disciplines, research scholars and policy planners.

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