

Assessing the transformative potential of free and compulsory education in India: A systematic review

Hemlata^{1*}, Mithilesh Kumar Yadav²

¹ Research Scholar, IIMT University, Meerut, UP

hemlatasingh2006@gmail.com

² Assistant Professor, IIMT University. Meerut, UP

Abstract: A revolutionary change occurred in India's social and legal structure when Article 21A of the Constitution recognized education as a basic right and the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, made it a reality. Free and compulsory education has the ability to bring about social transformation, inclusion, and equity, and this systematic analysis analyzes that possibility. This study examines the limitations and accomplishments of the rights-based education framework by drawing on academic literature, policy documents, government reports, and empirical studies released after RTE. The results show that there has been a lot of success in increasing enrollment, achieving gender parity, improving school infrastructure, and giving underrepresented groups better access, especially with the help of inclusive legislation like Section 12(1)(c). The achievement of meaningful and equitable education is, however, obstructed by enduring problems with learning outcomes, teacher ability, regional inequities, and implementation gaps. Although there has been significant progress in access to education, the assessment emphasizes that in order to fulfill education's social mandate to transform, there must be continuous policy integration, reforms centered on quality, and alignment with the NEP 2020.

Keyword: Free and Compulsory Education, Article 21A, RTE Act 2009, Social Transformation, Educational Equity

INTRODUCTION

An important turning point in India's proud history of democracy and development came with the country's formal recognition of the right to free and compulsory public education. A free and compulsory public education is provided to all children between the ages of six and fourteen by the state, according to Article 21A, which was added to the Constitution by the Constitution (Eighty-sixth Amendment) Act, 2002. Article 21 of the Indian Constitution guarantees every citizen the right to an education, elevating it from the status of a guiding principle to that of a fundamental human right.

This constitutional requirement under Article 21A was finally fulfilled on April 1, 2010, with the enactment of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009. The RTE Act creates a comprehensive legal framework that lays out the responsibilities and duties of the State, local governments, schools, teachers, and parents in order to ensure that all children have access to basic education. By specifying norms related to access, infrastructure, teacher

qualifications, child-friendly practices, and non-discrimination, the Act transforms education from a mere policy aspiration into a justiciable right, enabling judicial oversight and accountability in its implementation.

Education plays a pivotal role in promoting equity, empowering individuals, and fostering human growth within the larger context of social reform. In order to end generational poverty, social isolation, and promote inclusive growth, it is commonly acknowledged that universal access to elementary education is crucial. By mandating free education and eliminating direct economic barriers such as school fees, the RTE framework seeks to address long-standing structural inequalities rooted in caste hierarchies, gender discrimination, socio-economic deprivation, and regional disparities. Education, in this sense, becomes a transformative tool for enabling equal opportunities and strengthening democratic participation.

However, the realization of education's transformative promise depends not only on legal guarantees but also on effective implementation and learning outcomes. While India has made significant progress in expanding school access and enrollment, questions remain regarding the depth and quality of educational transformation achieved. This review synthesizes insights from scholarly literature, empirical studies, government reports, and critical policy analyses to assess the extent to which free and compulsory education has fulfilled its intended role as an instrument of social change. The objective of the review is to offer a fair assessment of India's advancement in fulfilling the constitutional goal of education as a basis for inclusive and equitable social transformation by looking at both successes and ongoing difficulties.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: EDUCATION AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

Education is globally acknowledged as a fundamental instrument of social transformation, functioning as a means to enhance individual capabilities, promote social mobility, and reduce structural inequalities. From a human development perspective, education expands people's freedoms by enabling informed participation in economic, social, and political life. Scholars such as Amartya Sen emphasize that education is not merely an outcome of development but a central capability that strengthens agency, empowerment, and democratic participation. In this sense, education serves both instrumental and intrinsic roles in transforming societies by fostering equity, inclusion, and social justice.

A major tenet of constitutional philosophy in India is the link between formal education and societal change. An equal social order could not have been imagined by the Constitution's

founders without education as its cornerstone. The state was obligated to provide free and compulsory education to children up until the age of fourteen according to Article 45 of the Constitution, which was a DPSP when it was approved. Although the Directive Principles were morally obligatory, their enforceability and practical impact were constrained by their non-justiciability. As a result, those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, minority groups, and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes still faced obstacles to education.

The 68th Constitutional Amendment Act, 2002, which replaced Article 45 with Article 21A, brought about a sea change in India's educational system. As a result of education's status as a fundamental right, the state is obligated by law to ensure that all children aged 6–14 receive a free and mandatory education. This shift marked a shift away from welfare-oriented policies and toward a rights-based paradigm by making education a right instead of a privilege. According to legal scholars, India's commitment to aligning social policy with the principles enshrined in Article 21 (Right to Life and Personal Liberty) demonstrates the country's commitment to dignity, equality, and justice.

The RTE Act, which implemented Article 21A, outlined the responsibilities of the state, schools, instructors, and parents in relation to the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education, 2009. Quality, equity, and inclusivity are also important to the Act's conception of education, alongside accessibility. Provisions relating to neighborhood schools, minimum infrastructure standards, qualified teachers, child-friendly norms, and the prohibition of detention and corporal punishment collectively reflect an attempt to reshape the schooling experience in line with democratic and human rights values. From a social transformation standpoint, the RTE Act seeks to dismantle long-standing barriers to education rooted in poverty, gender discrimination, caste hierarchies, and regional disparities.

Education's transformative potential is further evident in its role in breaking intergenerational cycles of deprivation. Empirical studies consistently highlight that universal elementary education contributes to improved health outcomes, reduced child labor, enhanced gender equality, and increased economic productivity. In India, free and compulsory education has been viewed as a strategic tool to integrate marginalized populations into the mainstream, thereby fostering social cohesion and national development. Section 12(1)(c) of the RTE Act mandates that economically disadvantaged sectors be allotted 25% of the seats in private, unaided schools. This clearly aims to promote social integration and educational equity.

However, the conceptual framework of education as a vehicle for social transformation also recognizes that legal guarantees alone are insufficient. Transformation depends on the effective implementation of policies, the quality of learning outcomes, and the responsiveness of educational institutions to socio-cultural realities. The revolutionary potential of free and mandatory education may only be partially achieved, according to scholars, unless we solve structural problems, including regional inequality, learning deficiencies, and teacher shortages.

In this light, India's free and mandatory education system can be seen as a multi-faceted reform initiative, bringing together principles of social fairness, human development, and constitutional morality. Transforming from a directive concept to a basic right represents a stronger dedication to social change, and the RTE Act establishes the institutional framework to make this dedication a reality. Assessing the effectiveness of this framework requires examining not only access and enrollment but also the extent to which education contributes to equitable social change, empowerment, and inclusive development.

METHODOLOGY

This study takes a look at the revolutionary power of free and mandatory education in India using a systematic review method. Academic papers, policy papers, and official government reports, mostly published in the recent ten years, form the basis of the review. In this time, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 came into force in India, and the country's educational policy framework underwent significant changes.

Sources of Data

The review's data came from a variety of reliable sources, including academic books, peer-reviewed journals, national policy papers, and reports released by reputable organizations like the Indian government's Ministry of Education, UNICEF, and UNESCO, among others. A review of the RTE Act and an examination of Article 21A of the Indian Constitution were based on scholarly articles and decisions made by Indian courts.

Search Strategy

A structured keyword search was conducted to identify relevant literature. Keywords and phrases included "*free and compulsory education in India*," "*Right to Education Act, 2009*," "*Article 21A implementation*," "*education access and equity*," "*learning outcomes*," and

“social transformation through education.” These keywords were used in various combinations to ensure comprehensive coverage of the subject. Looking through the studies' reference lists helped find more pertinent sources.

Selection Criteria

Studies were selected based on their relevance to the objectives of the review. The inclusion criteria comprised sources that focused on India's elementary education system and addressed themes related to educational access, inclusion, quality, policy implementation, or social impact of free and compulsory education. Sources lacking analytical depth, those unrelated to the Indian context, or those not aligned with elementary education were excluded to maintain focus and academic rigor.

Data Analysis

The selected literature was analyzed using a thematic and qualitative synthesis method. Key findings from the studies were organized into thematic categories such as access to education, inclusion of marginalized groups, quality of learning outcomes, institutional and implementation challenges, and policy effectiveness. Comparative analysis was undertaken to identify converging and diverging perspectives across studies, allowing for an all-encompassing evaluation of the game-changing impact of free & mandatory education in India.

Scope and Limitations

The review relies exclusively on secondary sources, which may limit the ability to capture recent localized developments or region-specific variations. Additionally, differences in methodologies and data quality across the reviewed studies may affect direct comparability. In spite of these caveats, the methodology used to systematically choose and analyze reliable sources offers a strong foundation for assessing the societal and educational effects of free & mandatory education in India.

ACHIEVEMENTS OF FREE AND COMPULSORY EDUCATION IN INDIA

A major step forward in India's fight for social change has been the country's adoption of free and mandatory education in accordance with Article 21A & Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009. Over more than a decade of implementation, the RTE framework has yielded several measurable achievements, particularly in expanding access to

education, improving physical infrastructure, promoting gender equity, and enhancing inclusion of disadvantaged groups. While challenges persist, these achievements highlight the transformative potential of education as a constitutional right.

Increased Enrollment and Access

One of the most notable achievements of the RTE framework has been the substantial expansion of enrollment and access to elementary education across India. Following the enforcement of the RTE Act, national indicators reveal a marked improvement in the GER at both primary & upper primary levels. The provision of free education, including textbooks, uniforms, and mid-day meals, has reduced economic barriers that historically prevented children from attending school, particularly among low-income households.

The number of children who are not in school has decreased significantly, particularly in rural areas and those with low socioeconomic status, thanks in large part to the Act's mandate for universal access. By mandating the establishment of neighborhood schools within prescribed distance norms, the RTE Act addressed geographical constraints that previously limited school participation. This has been particularly beneficial for younger children and girls, for whom long travel distances often posed safety and social concerns.

At the state level, access improvements have been uneven but notable. States such as Maharashtra have reported progress in achieving universal access ratios at both primary and upper primary stages. The expansion and rationalization of school networks, combined with targeted enrollment drives, have contributed to higher participation rates across diverse demographic groups. These trends indicate that the RTE framework has been effective in translating the constitutional mandate of education into tangible access outcomes.

Infrastructure Development and Gender Parity

Another significant achievement of the RTE Act lies in its focus on minimum infrastructure standards for schools. The Act prescribes essential norms relating to classrooms, sanitation facilities, drinking water, playgrounds, libraries, and teacher availability. As a result, many government schools have witnessed improvements in their physical learning environments, which are critical for student retention and effective learning.

The provision of separate toilets for girls has had a particularly positive impact on gender parity in education. Numerous studies have highlighted that inadequate sanitation facilities are

a major factor contributing to girls' absenteeism and dropouts, especially during adolescence. By addressing this barrier, the RTE framework has contributed to increased enrollment and sustained participation of girls at the elementary level. National data reflects a narrowing of gender gaps in school enrollment, indicating progress toward gender equality in access to education.

Improved infrastructure has also enhanced the overall legitimacy and attractiveness of government schools, encouraging parents from diverse socio-economic backgrounds to enroll their children. While disparities in infrastructure quality remain across regions, the RTE Act has established a uniform benchmark that has guided both central and state-level investments in school development.

Inclusion of Disadvantaged Groups

A distinctive and transformative feature of the RTE Act is its explicit emphasis on social inclusion, particularly through Section 12(1)(c). Under this clause, the state will reimburse privately run schools if they set aside 25% of their entry-level enrollment slots for students from economically weaker sections (EWS) and other disadvantaged groups. This policy represents a significant attempt to democratize access to quality education and promote social integration within the schooling system.

Millions of children from marginalized backgrounds have gained access to private schools through this provision, enabling exposure to improved learning environments, resources, and peer networks. From a social transformation perspective, this mechanism seeks to reduce educational segregation and challenge entrenched socio-economic divides by fostering inclusive classrooms. The policy has also contributed to increased awareness among disadvantaged communities regarding educational rights and entitlements.

Beyond private school inclusion, the RTE framework has strengthened protections for children from vulnerable groups by prohibiting discrimination, corporal punishment, and arbitrary detention. Particularly for minority students, children from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, first-generation students, and migrating communities, these child-centric provisions seek to establish an inclusive and supportive educational environment.

When considered as a whole, India's free and compulsory education system's accomplishments show substantial development in the direction of equity, inclusion, and universal access. Increased enrollment, improved infrastructure, enhanced gender parity, and targeted inclusion

mechanisms underscore the potential of education as a powerful tool for social transformation. While these gains do not fully address deeper concerns related to quality and learning outcomes, they provide a strong foundation upon which further reforms can build.

PERSISTENT CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTATION

Free and compulsory education in India still faces a number of institutional and structural obstacles, despite the fact that the RTE Act and the constitutional recognition of education as a basic right have greatly increased access to primary education. These challenges limit the extent to which education can function as a truly transformative force and highlight the gap between policy intent and ground-level realities.

Quality of Education and Learning Outcomes

Despite notable improvements in enrollment and school participation, learning outcomes remain a critical concern within India's elementary education system. Multiple national and independent assessments consistently indicate that a substantial proportion of students lack foundational literacy and numeracy skills, even after completing several years of formal schooling. Many children struggle with basic reading comprehension, arithmetic operations, and problem-solving abilities, raising questions about the effectiveness of classroom instruction.

This situation underscores a significant disconnect between access and achievement. While the RTE framework has succeeded in bringing children into schools, it has not adequately ensured meaningful learning. Factors such as rote-based pedagogy, overcrowded classrooms, limited individualized attention, and insufficient teacher training contribute to poor learning outcomes. The absence of robust assessment mechanisms to track student progress further compounds the issue, making it difficult to identify and address learning gaps at an early stage.

The emphasis on enrollment-centric indicators, rather than learning-based metrics, has also diverted attention from educational quality. Consequently, the system's failure to transform schooling into true educational accomplishment limits the transformational promise of free and mandatory education.

Implementation Gaps and Infrastructure Deficits

Although the RTE Act prescribes minimum infrastructure standards, significant disparities persist in the availability & quality of school facilities, mainly in government and rural schools.

Many institutions continue to face challenges such as inadequate drinking water, poorly maintained sanitation facilities, insufficient classrooms, lack of libraries, and absence of playgrounds. These deficiencies directly affect student attendance, health, and engagement with learning.

The digital divide has emerged as an additional concern, especially in the post-pandemic context. Technology has not been fully integrated into teaching & learning due to a lack of digital literacy, inconsistent internet connectivity, and limited access to digital devices. This has widened educational inequalities between urban and rural areas and between private and government schools.

Teacher-related challenges further exacerbate implementation gaps. Shortages of trained teachers, high pupil-teacher ratios, and uneven teacher deployment across regions undermine the quality of instruction. Teachers' ability to concentrate on student engagement and instructional innovation is sometimes diminished when they are encumbered with administrative tasks that do not directly relate to teaching. These factors collectively weaken the effectiveness of the RTE framework in delivering quality education.

Socio-Economic and Regional Disparities

A key challenge to achieving equal education under the RTE framework is the persistence of socio-economic and regional differences. There are still disproportionate obstacles to regular and quality education for children from disadvantaged communities, such as SC and ST, minorities, migratory families, & economically lower sections. These barriers are often reinforced by poverty, child labor, seasonal migration, and limited parental educational support.

Geographical disparities further complicate implementation. Remote and rural regions frequently suffer from poor infrastructure, teacher absenteeism, and limited monitoring mechanisms. In contrast, urban and better-resourced regions tend to benefit more effectively from RTE provisions. Gender-based challenges also persist, particularly in conservative socio-cultural settings where girls' education is deprioritized due to early marriage, domestic responsibilities, or safety concerns.

These intersecting inequalities highlight that formal equality in policy does not automatically translate into substantive equality in outcomes. Without targeted interventions and

contextualized policy responses, free and compulsory education risks perpetuating existing social hierarchies rather than dismantling them.

Unintended Consequences and Private Tuition Dependency

An emerging concern associated with the expansion of school enrollment under the RTE framework is the growing dependence on private tuition and supplementary coaching. As learning gaps persist within formal schooling, many families increasingly rely on private tutoring to compensate for deficiencies in classroom instruction. This phenomenon has led to the parallel growth of a shadow education system that operates outside formal regulatory mechanisms.

The reliance on private tuition has significant equity implications. While economically better-off families can afford additional educational support, children from poorer households often lack access to such resources, reinforcing learning inequalities. In this context, free schooling alone does not guarantee equal educational opportunity, as disparities in supplementary learning inputs continue to influence academic outcomes.

Moreover, the normalization of private tuition raises concerns about the accountability of formal education institutions. When learning is increasingly outsourced to private tutors, the responsibility of schools to deliver quality education becomes diluted, undermining the transformative objectives of the RTE Act.

The persistent challenges in implementing free and compulsory education reveal that legal entitlement and policy expansion must be accompanied by systemic quality reforms. Issues related to learning outcomes, infrastructure, teacher capacity, socio-economic inequality, and unintended marketization of education collectively constrain the transformative impact of the RTE framework. Addressing these challenges is essential for ensuring that education functions not merely as a right to schooling, but as a right to meaningful and equitable learning.

POLICY INTEGRATION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In order for free and compulsory education in India to realize its revolutionary potential, several factors must be in place. These include formal recognition, increased access, and the successful integration of educational policies or progressive reforms. Despite the fact that universal elementary education was established by the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, new policies are needed to address changing socioeconomic

realities and learning challenges. For educational transformation to be durable and inclusive, it is vital to integrate the goals of the RTE framework with larger educational reforms, especially the NEP 2020.

Alignment with NEP 2020

The NEP 2020 marks a significant shift in India's educational vision by emphasizing quality, equity, foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN), holistic development, and lifelong learning. Unlike earlier policy frameworks that primarily focused on access and enrollment, NEP 2020 prioritizes learning outcomes, early childhood education, and competency-based pedagogy. In this context, scholars argue that the RTE Act must be reinterpreted and operationally aligned with NEP goals to fully realize its transformative potential.

One of the critical areas of convergence is the focus on foundational literacy and numeracy. NEP 2020 recognizes that early learning deficits have long-term consequences for educational attainment. Aligning RTE provisions with national FLN missions can help shift the focus from mere school attendance to meaningful learning. Additionally, NEP's emphasis on flexibility, multilingual education, and experiential learning complements the child-centric ethos of the RTE Act and can enhance inclusivity for first-generation learners and marginalized children.

Further, NEP 2020 extends the conceptualization of education beyond the 6–14 age group by integrating early childhood care and education (ECCE) and secondary education within a unified framework. Aligning RTE implementation strategies with this broader continuum can ensure smoother educational transitions and reduce dropout rates. Such policy integration is crucial for transforming free and compulsory education into a comprehensive system that supports learning across developmental stages.

Strengthening Community Engagement

Community participation has been identified as a key determinant of effective policy implementation in decentralized education systems. The RTE Act institutionalizes community involvement through School Management Committees (SMCs), which are entrusted with school monitoring, development planning, and grievance redressal. Strengthening these grassroots institutions can significantly enhance accountability, transparency, and responsiveness in the education system.

Empowering SMCs through capacity-building initiatives, regular training, and access to relevant information can enable communities to actively participate in school governance. Increased parental involvement has been shown to improve student attendance, reduce dropout rates, and foster a sense of shared responsibility for educational outcomes. Community engagement also facilitates the identification of context-specific challenges, such as seasonal migration, language barriers, or socio-cultural constraints, allowing for localized and adaptive solutions.

Moreover, collaboration with local self-governments, civil society organizations, and non-governmental actors can strengthen monitoring mechanisms and support innovation at the school level. Such participatory governance structures reinforce the democratic foundations of the RTE framework and enhance education's role as an instrument of social transformation.

Focus on Quality and Teacher Capacity Building

Ensuring quality education is central to bridging the gap between access and learning outcomes. Given the importance of teachers to this process, enhancing their capacity should be a top priority for any future reforms. Funding for both in-service and pre-service teacher education should focus on developing educators' pedagogical skills, subject area expertise, understanding of child psychology, and inclusive pedagogical methods. Continuous professional development programs aligned with NEP 2020 can equip teachers to address diverse learning needs and adopt innovative teaching methodologies.

Pedagogical innovation, including activity-based learning, formative assessment, and the use of digital tools, can enhance classroom engagement and improve learning outcomes. At the same time, strengthening continuous and diagnostic assessment mechanisms can help identify learning gaps early and enable timely remedial interventions. Such assessment practices shift the focus from high-stakes testing to learner-centered evaluation, consistent with both RTE principles and NEP objectives.

Reducing non-teaching burdens on teachers, improving teacher deployment policies, and ensuring adequate pupil-teacher ratios are equally important for improving instructional quality. By prioritizing teacher empowerment and professional autonomy, the education system can move closer to realizing the transformative vision of free and compulsory education.

Integrating the RTE framework with NEP 2020, strengthening community participation, and prioritizing educational quality represent critical pathways for enhancing the transformative impact of free and compulsory education in India. These future directions underscore the need to move beyond access-driven metrics toward a holistic, equity-oriented, and learning-centered education system. By addressing structural gaps and embracing policy coherence, India can ensure that the constitutional promise of education translates into sustained social transformation and inclusive development.

CONCLUSION

The RTE Act, 2009, made possible by the legal recognition of free and compulsory education under Article 21A, stands as a monumental social policy reform in independent India. The expansion of enrollment, improved gender parity, strengthened infrastructure norms, and inclusion of disadvantaged groups demonstrate meaningful progress toward universalizing elementary education. These achievements affirm education's central role in promoting equity, social mobility, and democratic participation. However, the transformative promise of the RTE framework remains partially realized. Persistent concerns regarding learning outcomes, teacher preparedness, regional imbalances, socio-economic inequalities, and growing dependence on private tuition reveal a critical gap between access and quality. True social transformation requires moving beyond enrollment-driven success to ensuring meaningful, equitable, and outcome-oriented learning. Future reforms must prioritize quality enhancement, teacher capacity building, community engagement, and alignment with the NEP 2020. Free and compulsory education in India can only transform from a constitutional guarantee into a real tool for inclusive and long-lasting social transformation if there is persistent institutional commitment.

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