

CENTRALISED MODELS TO DECENTRALIZED GOVERNANCE: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF DEVELOPMENT PLANNING IN INDIAN EDUCATION

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Abstract:

Educational development planning in India has traditionally been an important instrument of socio-economic transformation, equity promotion and nation-building. Since independence, India has depended on structured planning frameworks to expand access, improve quality and address systemic inequalities. This paradigm has gradually shifted from a centralised model under the Five-Year Plans of India to a more decentralized and participatory governance structure, strengthened by reforms such as the National Education Policy 2020. This paper critically analyses this transition through the theoretical lenses of Human Capital Theory, Capability Approach and decentralisation theory. It also uses recent empirical evidence and secondary data to evaluate the effectiveness of educational planning in India. Findings show that while decentralisation has improved local responsiveness and participation, persistent challenges such as inequitable financing, governance inefficiencies, and implementation gaps still impede outcomes (Tilak, 2018; Mehrotra, 2019; KPMG, 2020). The study suggests a hybrid planning model that integrates centralised strategic vision with decentralised implementation to realise sustainable and inclusive educational development.

Keywords:[Educational Planning, Decentralization, Governance in Education, Educational equity, Learning outcomes]

Introduction

Education is the most important factor that decides the socio-economic future of countries, especially developing countries like India. 'Educational planning has been an integral part of national development strategies since independence. Importance has been attached to it in promoting economic growth, social mobility and equity (Aggarwal, 2000). The centralised planning model, implemented in the first few decades, allowed for rapid growth in educational access and infrastructure. However, it resulted in rigid policy frameworks that often did not address local needs and regional disparities (Tilak, 2018). With economic liberalisation in the 1990s, India began to move towards a decentralised governance model with efficiency, accountability and local participation (Kingdon, 2007).

This shift has been strengthened by recent policy initiatives, most notably the National Education Policy 2020 that encourages flexibility, inclusivity and context-specific planning (Government of India, 2020). However, issues of equity, quality and implementation persist, demanding a critical review of educational planning in India.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this paper is to critically examine the trajectory of educational development planning in India. Specifically, the study aims to analyse the evolution of planning frameworks, explore the shift from centralised to decentralized governance, evaluate the effectiveness of current policy approaches, identify key challenges in implementation, and propose strategies for improving educational planning in the Indian context.

Theoretical Framework of the Study

A comprehensive understanding of educational development planning in India requires engagement with multiple theoretical perspectives that explain the relationship between education, development, governance, and social justice. The study is based on three major theoretical frameworks, namely Human Capital Theory, Capability Approach, and Decentralization Theory. These theories are also embedded in the general discourse of educational equity and development planning.

❖ ***Human Capital Theory and Educational Planning:*** Human capital theory offers one of the earliest and most prominent foundations of education planning, especially in independent India. Being a derivative of neoclassical economics, human capital theory views education as an investment that boosts the efficiency of individuals, thus promoting economic development (Becker, 1993). From this perspective, the purpose of educational planning is to make education accessible, boost enrolment, and create a workforce that can contribute to economic development through industrialisation.

Regarding the case of India, Human Capital Theory finds expression in India's early efforts at centralized educational planning through its Five-Year Plans. Educationally, these Plans emphasized quantitative growth through the creation of institutions of learning, hiring teachers, and organizing literacy programs based on the assumption that higher education would result in higher productivity and economic development (Tilak, 2018).

However, the theory of Human Capital was effective in steering the expansion of educational facilities, it has also been criticized for being limited in its purely economic perspective and for confining education to its function as a vehicle for economic output, disregarding the social, cultural, and political significance it holds. In the Indian context, this becomes an even greater concern considering the enduring social hierarchies of the country which fail to consider the complexities associated with issues such as caste discrimination, gender bias and regional inequalities. (Mehrotra, 2019).

Furthermore, studies show that higher education does not always lead to equal economic opportunities, especially in areas with deep-rooted inequalities. This means that while Human Capital Theory is useful for understanding the economic reasons behind educational planning, it is not enough on its own to tackle the challenges of educational development in India.

❖ ***Capability Approach and Educational Equity:*** The constraints of Human Capital Theory have prompted the development of more comprehensive and inclusive frameworks, with the Capability Approach, introduced by Sen (1999), being particularly noteworthy. This approach

redirects the emphasis of development from mere economic growth to the enhancement of human capabilities—understood as the actual freedoms and opportunities available to individuals for achieving valued lifestyles.

In the realm of educational planning, the Capability Approach underscores the necessity of not only providing access to education but also ensuring the quality, relevance, and transformative potential of educational experiences. It stresses the significance of guaranteeing that individuals are not just enrolled in educational institutions but are truly capable of learning, cultivating critical thinking abilities, and engaging meaningfully in society.

This viewpoint holds significant importance within the Indian educational landscape, where access issues have predominantly been tackled at the elementary stage, yet challenges concerning quality and equity continue to exist. For example, even with high enrolment figures, notable disparities in learning outcomes persist among various social groups, especially within marginalized communities such as Scheduled Tribes and rural populations (ASER, 2023). The Capability Approach offers a framework for comprehending these disparities by highlighting the influence of social, economic, and cultural factors on individuals' educational opportunities.

Furthermore, the Capability Approach closely aligns with the aims of modern policies like the National Education Policy 2020, which aspires to foster holistic development, critical thinking, and inclusive education. By concentrating on broader objectives of empowerment and social justice, this approach broadens the focus of educational planning beyond mere economic factors. Nonetheless, implementing the Capability Approach in educational planning introduces its own set of challenges. Assessing capabilities and converting them into policy actions necessitates intricate and context-specific strategies. Still, its focus on equity, inclusion, and human development renders it an essential framework for evaluating and enhancing educational planning in India.

❖ ***Decentralisation Theory and Governance in Education:*** Decentralisation Theory offers a crucial perspective for comprehending the governance aspect of educational planning. It is founded on the idea that shifting decision-making power from central authorities to local entities can improve efficiency, accountability, and responsiveness to local demands (Bray, 1999). In the realm of education, decentralisation entails empowering state governments, district authorities, and local communities to engage in the planning, implementation, and monitoring processes.

The movement towards decentralisation in India gained traction during the post-liberalisation era, as part of wider governance reforms aimed at enhancing public service delivery. Educational initiatives such as the District Primary Education Programme and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan integrated decentralised planning frameworks, highlighting the importance of district-level planning and community involvement (Kingdon, 2007).

More recently, policy frameworks like NEP 2020 have further solidified this strategy by promoting institutional autonomy, school complexes, and community participation. The fundamental belief is that local stakeholders are in a better position to recognize and address the unique educational requirements of their communities.

Nevertheless, the success of decentralization in educational planning depends on various factors,

including institutional capacity, resource availability, and the quality of governance. In the Indian scenario, 'decentralization has led to mixed results, with certain regions experiencing enhanced flexibility and innovation, while others face challenges related to capacity limitations and administrative inefficiencies (OECD, 2021).

This indicates that decentralization is not a cure-all for the issues related to educational planning. In the absence of sufficient support systems, it may result in fragmentation, inconsistency, and potentially exacerbate existing inequalities. Consequently, although decentralisation theory offers important perspectives on governance reforms, its implementation must be thoughtfully adapted to the particular socio-economic and institutional contexts of India.

Although each of the aforementioned frameworks provides significant insights, none alone is adequate to completely elucidate the intricacies of educational planning in India. Human Capital Theory underscores the economic justification for investing in education, the Capability Approach stresses the importance of equity and human development, and Decentralisation Theory concentrates on governance and participation.

Consequently, an integrated theoretical perspective is essential to encompass the multifaceted nature of educational planning. This approach would acknowledge the significance of economic growth while also emphasising social justice and institutional effectiveness. Furthermore, it would recognise the necessity for a balanced governance framework that merges centralised policy guidance with decentralised execution. This comprehensive framework offers a more thorough foundation for examining the progression of educational planning in India and for pinpointing strategies to tackle its ongoing challenges.

Evolution of Educational Planning in India

The development of educational planning in India illustrates the wider socio-economic, political, and ideological changes that the nation has experienced since gaining independence. Instead of a consistent or straightforward advancement, this development signifies a dynamic process influenced by shifting development priorities, governance frameworks, and theoretical perspectives. It can be analysed through various phases, each marked by unique planning strategies, institutional frameworks, and policy goals.

❖ ***Post-Independence Centralised Planning (1950s–1980s):*** In the immediate aftermath of gaining independence, India embraced a centralised approach to development planning, shaped by socialist ideals and the urgency of rapid nation-building.

Educational planning was incorporated into national development strategies through India's Five-Year Plans, which acted as the main tools for policy development and resource distribution.

During this period, the government took on a pivotal role in enhancing educational infrastructure, boosting enrolment rates, and fostering literacy. The central aim was to establish a robust education system that could facilitate economic advancement and social cohesion (Aggarwal, 2000). Considerable focus was directed towards the creation of schools, the training of educators, and the formulation of standardised curricula.

Although this centralised strategy was successful in achieving quantitative growth, it revealed various structural shortcomings. The hierarchical nature of planning frequently overlooks regional

diversity and local requirements, leading to inconsistent development results. Rural and marginalised populations, in particular, continued to be inadequately served despite overall advancements (Tilak, 2018). Furthermore, the emphasis on expansion often compromised quality, resulting in challenges such as teacher shortages, insufficient infrastructure, and subpar learning outcomes.

❖ ***Policy Reorientation and the National Policy on Education (1986/1992):*** The constraints of previous planning methodologies resulted in a notable shift in policy during the 1980s, leading to the establishment of the National Policy on Education (NPE) in 1986 and its subsequent revision in 1992. This era represented a transition from a focus solely on quantitative growth to a more qualitative and inclusive strategy for educational advancement. The NPE prioritised the universalisation of elementary education, the promotion of adult literacy, and the mitigation of inequalities among various social groups. It also introduced the notion of educational planning as a more comprehensive and integrated endeavour, encompassing elements such as curriculum reform, teacher training, and community engagement.

Significantly, this time frame marked the beginning of decentralisation efforts, with an increased focus on planning at the district level and local participation. Nevertheless, these initiatives were still constrained in their reach, as the overarching planning structure remained predominantly centralised.

❖ ***Liberalization and Decentralization (1990s–2000s):*** The economic liberalization that occurred in the 1990s represented a pivotal moment in India's developmental path, carrying substantial consequences for educational planning. This era was defined by a transition towards market-driven policies, enhanced involvement of the private sector, and governance reforms designed to boost efficiency and accountability (Kingdon, 2007). Within the education sector, decentralization became a crucial approach to overcoming the shortcomings of centralized planning. Initiatives such as the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) and subsequently the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) implemented decentralized planning frameworks, focusing on district-level planning, community engagement, and local accountability.

These efforts marked a notable shift from previous methodologies, as they aimed to align educational planning more closely with local requirements. The participation of Panchayati Raj Institutions and community-based organizations represented a significant advancement towards democratizing educational governance.

Nevertheless, the execution of decentralized planning during this period was inconsistent. While certain areas successfully leveraged local planning frameworks, others encountered obstacles related to capacity limitations, insufficient resources, and fragile institutional frameworks (Mehrotra, 2019). This situation emphasised the intricacies of decentralisation as a policy approach and highlighted the significance of contextual elements.

❖ ***Rights-Based Approach and Universalization (2000s–2010s):*** The early 21st century saw the rise of a rights-based approach to education, culminating in the passage of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE) in 2009. This represented a notable transformation

in educational planning, as access to elementary education was acknowledged as a fundamental right.

The RTE Act established legally enforceable standards concerning infrastructure, teacher qualifications, and student-teacher ratios, thereby enhancing the regulatory framework for educational planning. It also reaffirmed the commitment to the universalisation of elementary education, particularly for marginalised communities. Throughout this period, educational planning increasingly prioritized issues of equity and inclusion, with specific interventions aimed at diminishing disparities. Initiatives were crafted to meet the needs of disadvantaged groups, including girls, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and children residing in rural areas.

Despite these progressions, challenges regarding implementation remained. The enforcement of RTE standards varied across states, and problems such as teacher absenteeism, insufficient infrastructure, and subpar learning outcomes continued to affect the quality of education (ASER, 2023). This underscored the disparity between policy intentions and the realities on the ground.

❖ ***Integrated and Outcome-Oriented Planning (2010s–Present):*** In recent years, educational planning in India has transitioned towards a more integrated and outcome-focused methodology. Initiatives like ‘Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan exemplify an effort to unify various programs and adopt a comprehensive viewpoint that covers school education from pre-primary through secondary levels.

This period is marked by a heightened focus on learning outcomes, data-driven strategies, and the application of technology for monitoring and assessment. Systems such as UDISE+ have improved data accessibility, facilitating more informed decision-making.

At the policy level, the launch of the National Education Policy 2020 signifies a thorough attempt to rethink educational planning in India. The policy underscores the importance of flexibility, multidisciplinary education, institutional independence, and the incorporation of local knowledge systems. It also promotes a transition from rote memorization to competency-based education, mirroring global trends in educational reform.

Nevertheless, the execution of these reforms poses a considerable challenge. The effectiveness of outcome-oriented planning relies on the availability of dependable data, efficient governance structures, and sufficient institutional capacity. In numerous instances, these essential conditions are not entirely fulfilled, which restricts the effectiveness of policy initiatives (OECD, 2021).

The development of educational planning in India indicates a gradual transition from a model that is primarily state-centric and focused on inputs to one that is more participatory and oriented towards outcomes. Nevertheless, this shift has not been uniform or fully realised, as there remain significant gaps in implementation, equity, and quality. The historical path indicates that educational planning in India needs to progress beyond mere structural reforms and towards more profound institutional changes. Achieving this necessitates not only innovative policies but also ongoing efforts to enhance governance, develop capacity, and tackle socio-economic disparities.

Data-Driven Analysis of Educational Development in India

To critically evaluate educational planning, it is essential to examine empirical trends in key indicators such as enrolment, expenditure, and learning outcomes.

❖ ***Enrolment and Access***: India has achieved notable advancements in broadening educational access. Recent statistics reveal that the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) at the elementary level surpasses 95%, signifying almost universal access (UNESCO, 2022). Nevertheless, inequalities continue to exist at the secondary and higher education tiers, especially among marginalized communities.

Recent research indicates that dropout rates are still elevated among Scheduled Tribes and rural demographics, underscoring ongoing socio-economic obstacles (ASER, 2023).

❖ ***Public Expenditure and Financing Pattern***: Public spending on education in India has consistently hovered between 4% and 4.5% of GDP, which is below the suggested 6% (World Bank, 2022). This lack of investment negatively impacts infrastructure, the quality of teachers, and overall learning results.

Additionally, differences in educational funding across states lead to unequal developmental results, with less affluent states encountering more significant limitations (Tilak, 2018).

Another significant trend is the growing influence of private spending in education. The expansion of private schools and tutoring centres indicates both a heightened demand for quality education and recognised shortcomings in the public education system. Nevertheless, this trend also brings forth concerns regarding equity, as access to private education is predominantly influenced by socio-economic status.

From a planning standpoint, these trends underscore the necessity for a more equitable and efficient distribution of resources, along with increased public investment in education.

❖ ***Learning Outcomes and Quality Deficits***: Although access to education has seen enhancements, the quality of learning outcomes continues to be a significant issue. Reports reveal that a considerable percentage of elementary school students do not possess fundamental literacy and numeracy skills (ASER, 2023).

This implies that while educational planning has effectively increased access, it has not been as successful in guaranteeing quality. The ongoing issue of low learning levels implies that planning processes have inadequately considered classroom-level elements, including teaching quality, pedagogical methods, and student engagement. Furthermore, it suggests that monitoring systems have traditionally prioritized quantitative measures over qualitative results. From a policy standpoint, this highlights the necessity for a fundamental change 'towards outcome-oriented planning, wherein learning achievements are regarded as the primary measure of success.

❖ ***Digitalization and the Post-Pandemic Shift***: The COVID-19 pandemic has brought a new aspect to educational planning, hastening the integration of digital technologies. Online learning platforms, digital materials, and virtual classrooms have become vital instruments for maintaining educational continuity.

Nevertheless, this transition has also revealed considerable inequalities in access to digital resources. Students from rural areas and low-income families frequently lack access to devices, internet connectivity, and conducive learning environments (UNESCO, 2022). This digital divide not only interrupted learning but also exacerbated existing inequalities.

From a planning standpoint, the pandemic has underscored the necessity of incorporating technology into education in an inclusive way. Future planning initiatives must prioritize closing the digital divide by investing in infrastructure, training educators, and ensuring fair access to digital resources.

The analysis based on data presents a multifaceted view of educational advancement in India. Although considerable strides have been achieved in broadening access and diminishing gender inequalities, issues concerning quality, equity, and funding continue to exist. The results indicate that educational planning has been more effective in tackling quantitative measures rather than qualitative results. The ongoing disparities and learning shortfalls suggest that forthcoming planning should embrace a more comprehensive and results-focused strategy, incorporating access, quality, equity, and governance. This necessitates not only heightened investment but also more efficient execution, improved data utilization, and enhanced institutional capabilities.

Discussions of the study

The results of this research indicate that the progression of educational planning in India is not simply a straightforward shift from centralized to decentralised governance; instead, it is a multifaceted and inconsistent process influenced by institutional capabilities, socio-economic disparities, and political factors. Although decentralization has been extensively advocated as a means to enhance efficiency and responsiveness, its results within the Indian context are significantly dependent on local circumstances and structural limitations.

A key insight derived from this examination is the ongoing gap between policy and practice, which continues to hinder the effectiveness of educational planning. While national policies, such as the National Education Policy 2020, set forth ambitious objectives concerning equity, quality, and inclusion, their implementation is frequently obstructed by administrative inefficiencies, disjointed governance frameworks, and insufficient institutional capacity (Tilak, 2018; OECD, 2021). This indicates that the primary challenge in Indian educational planning lies not in the lack of progressive policy frameworks, but in the system's constrained capacity to effectively implement these frameworks.

A more thorough examination reveals that decentralisation, although theoretically consistent with democratic governance and participatory development, has resulted in uneven outcomes across different regions. Areas with enhanced administrative capabilities, superior financial resources, and more competent leadership have successfully utilised decentralisation to enhance educational results. Conversely, regions with limited resources, especially those with significant populations of marginalized groups, have faced challenges in effectively executing decentralized planning, which has intensified pre-existing inequalities (Mehrotra, 2019; World Bank, 2022). This disparity calls into question the belief that decentralisation automatically fosters equity and emphasizes the necessity for tailored policy interventions.

Another significant aspect arising from this discourse is the conflict between centralized standardization and localized adaptability. Centralized planning, on one hand, guarantees national coherence, uniform standards, and continuity in policy. Conversely, decentralized planning facilitates contextual adjustments and innovation. The experience in India illustrates that excessive

centralization may lead to inflexibility and inefficiency, while too much decentralization can cause fragmentation and inconsistency. This conflict highlights the importance of a governance framework that harmonises both strategies.

The analysis further underscores the shortcomings of a primarily input-focused planning model, which has traditionally concentrated on the expansion of infrastructure, enrolment figures, and financial distribution. Although these inputs are crucial, they do not necessarily lead to enhanced learning outcomes. Recent evidence suggests that, despite nearly universal enrolment at the elementary level, actual learning levels fall significantly short of anticipated standards (ASER, 2023). This disparity indicates that educational planning should transition towards an outcome-focused approach, prioritizing the quality of learning, skill acquisition, and student involvement. Moreover, the discourse indicates that issues of social equity are still insufficiently addressed within existing planning frameworks. While initiatives like Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan strive to foster inclusive education, their effectiveness is frequently limited by systemic obstacles such as socio-cultural norms, economic disparities, and geographic isolation (Sen, 1999; UNESCO, 2022). In this regard, educational planning must evolve beyond a uniform approach and implement targeted strategies that cater to the distinct needs of marginalized groups.

Ultimately, the incorporation of theoretical frameworks such as the Capability Approach offers a more refined perspective on educational development. It redirects the emphasis from mere access to education towards the broader objective of enhancing individuals' capabilities and life opportunities. This viewpoint highlights the necessity for educational planning to focus not only on economic results but also on social justice, empowerment, and human development.

Conclusion

This paper has critically examined the evolution of educational development planning in India, tracing its trajectory from a centralized, state-driven model to a more decentralized and participatory governance framework. The analysis demonstrates that while this transformation reflects a broader shift toward democratic and inclusive governance, it has not fully resolved the structural challenges that continue to impede effective educational development.

One of the primary conclusions drawn from this study is that the distinction between centralized and decentralized planning is fundamentally constrained. Neither approach, when considered independently, can effectively tackle the intricate and multi-faceted challenges faced by the Indian education system. Centralized planning is crucial for maintaining national coherence and guiding policy direction; however, it often lacks the necessary flexibility to address local requirements. On the other hand, decentralized planning encourages participation and contextual relevance but is limited by disparities in institutional capacity and resource availability.

The ongoing existence of regional inequalities, gaps in implementation, and unequal outcomes suggests that the success of educational planning in India is influenced not only by the design of policies but also by governance frameworks, administrative effectiveness, and socio-economic conditions. The results underscore the pressing need to transcend mere symbolic decentralisation

in favour of functional decentralisation, wherein local institutions are sufficiently empowered, equipped, and supported to fulfil their roles effectively.

Another significant conclusion is that educational planning in India must shift from an input-centric model to an outcome-focused framework. Although considerable advancements have been achieved in broadening access to education, the quality of learning continues to be a major concern. Future planning initiatives should emphasize learning outcomes, skill enhancement, and comprehensive education, in alignment with the overarching objectives of human development.

In light of these findings, 'this paper advocates for the implementation of a hybrid educational planning model that merges a centralized strategic vision with decentralized execution. This approach would allow the state to uphold policy coherence and national standards while granting local institutions the autonomy to tailor strategies to their unique contexts. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of this model hinges on several essential factors, such as enhancing institutional capacity, guaranteeing equitable resource distribution, promoting data-driven decision-making, and establishing strong monitoring and accountability frameworks.

In summary, attaining sustainable educational development in India necessitates not just well-crafted policies but also enhanced implementation mechanisms capable of converting policy objectives into significant results across various socio-economic contexts.

To conclude, although India has made considerable progress in reshaping its educational planning framework, realizing the objectives of equity, quality, and sustainability demands a more sophisticated, integrated, and context-aware approach. The forthcoming challenge is not solely in formulating improved policies but also in guaranteeing their effective execution, thus transforming educational planning into substantial developmental outcomes.

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