



Research Paper

Revisiting The Journey of Free and Compulsory Primary Education in Pre-Independent India

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Abstract

Education is the key to development of human society. All round development of the individual depends on education. Hence it is very important to stress the development of education and expansion of free and compulsory education to the citizens of a country. In India, free and compulsory education has undergone several ups and downs. Through its age-old history of vicissitudes, it has got the shape of free, compulsory and universal primary education which is prevalent today. This paper will discuss the chronological journey of free and compulsory primary education in this country during the pre-independence era.

Keywords

Primary education, Pre-independence, East India Company, Educational Policy, Educational Plan, Scheme of Education, Educational Committee

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I. Introduction

The history of Indian education has an age-old history of ups and downs. In Pre-Vedic period education was open to all, although it became caste oriented during the Later-Vedic period. Gradually with the advent of middle age and British era, Indian education experienced massive downfall and mass education was neglected. Though some of the British policy or planning supported free and compulsory mass education, most of them were apathetic towards this. Because of financial constraint it was impossible for Indian educationists to plan for a compulsory and free education. The chronological discussion of history of Indian free and compulsory education shows how Indian education system got its modern, global vision.

Objective

To look back into the journey of free and primary education in pre-independent India chronologically.

II. Methodology

The paper is based on secondary source of data collected from different historical documents, journals, books and articles.

III. Discussion

Primary education is the base of entire education system and thus occupies major importance in educational endeavor. It prepares individual for further education as well as train them with analytical ability, confidence, productivity in a social environment. It has an age-old history in Indian context. In ancient Hindu culture education was regarded as one of the most essential needs of life. Students had to spend their valuable years of childhood in Gurukulas as residential students and stayed there until they finish their study. Education was free of cost at that time. After graduating from Gurukulas, students could voluntarily offer gurudakshina as per their capabilities.

Later both Hindu and Muslims developed their own system of education. Women education gradually degraded. Educational institutions separated on the basis of religions, such as pathsala for Hindus and maqtabas for Muslims. But gradually education lost its importance. However, no noteworthy educational development was seen during this period.

Later during the British period, the East India Company gave importance to Indian education with the Charter Act of 1813. In the 43rd section of this Charter, it was mentioned that “ a sum of not less than one lakh of rupees in each year shall be set apart and applied to the revival and improvement of literature and the encouragement of the learned natives of India, and for the introduction and promotion of a knowledge of the sciences among the inhabitants of the British territories in India. (Sharp, 1920, p. 22). However, the company stressed on British education rather Indian one and this led to a new controversy.

At that point of time, Lord Macaulay submitted his minute stating the downward filtration theory which opposed the education for all. Christian missionary William Adam inquired regarding the vernacular education in three states (Bengal, Orissa and Bihar) and suggested for the development of vernacular education in his report in 1938. He proposed for establishment of at least one school in every village for compulsory primary education. However, establishment of individual schools in every village seemed to be expensive to the General Committee of Public Instruction and rejected Adam’s proposals.

In 1852, the Revenue Survey commissioner in Bombay, Captain Wingate envisioned the compulsory primary education for the first time.

Wood’s Despatch(1854) emphasised on mass education by establishing provincial educational departments and at least one government school in each district as envisioned by Adam’s Report.

At the time the first Indian Education Commission (1882) came into being, demands aggravated for compulsory mass education in India. Many Indians including Dadabhai Naoroji, Gopal Krishna Gokhale demanded for free, universal primary education. it came to be true for the first time in Baroda in 1906 with free and compulsory education for boys and girls. Even after 3 times plea to pass an education bill for free and compulsory education nationwide, it was a failure. However, Gokhale’s dream came partly true in Bombay province with the famous Patel Act in 1918.

Later the Indian Education Policy of 1913 created a history with its significant proposal regarding free and compulsory education in this country. It requested the local governments to extend the application of the principle of free elementary education to the poor and backward sections. At the same time, it also stated its inability to go further that at that time (Mondal, A., 2017).

Meanwhile the Montagu-Chelmsford Constitutional reforms introduced a double rule indicating education as transferred subject and finance as reserved subject. As a result, the colonial responsibility for education had come to an end in British India. Finance being a reserved subject under the control of the councillors, Indian ministers could not make progress towards universalization of education. even the Hartog Committee (1930) also overlooked quantity of education and stressed on the qualitative development only.

In this scenario, the Wardha Scheme of Basic Education proposed by Gandhi emphasised on universal education. in the All-India National Conference in 1937, he proposed self-supporting basic education for 7 years. In this system the vocational and manual training were given importance.

After thorough survey , the Zakir Hussain Committee published its report named Basic National Education popularly known as the Wardha Scheme in 1938. In 1938 the new system started working in Bombay, Madras, Orissa, Bihar , United and Central Provinces. Examining the merits of this scheme of education, the Kher Committee accepted this activity-based education and recommended it for children of 6 to 14 years of age.

Due to the turmoil during the second World War, attention towards educational expansion was diverted but the need of free, compulsory education remained as the most important need of the citizens of this country. To meet the requirement a post war educational development was needed. Thus, the Central Advisory Board of Education accepted the proposals placed by the Sargent Plan (1944) of free and compulsory junior basic education for children of 6 to 11 years and compulsory senior basic education for children of 11 to 14 years of age. However , it was stated in the plan that owing to the lack of trained teachers, financial strength and increased number of students compulsory free education would take more than 40 years to be achieved.

During the initial years, the company did not pay much attention to the spread and development of Indian education. however, with the strong demand of the citizens, education became one of the most important issues of freedom movement. This compelled the British government to take action towards development of compulsory free education. Dadabhai Naoroji, Gokhale and Shri Vithalbhai Patel were the pioneers who continuously raised their voice and strived for passing the bill for expansion of free and compulsory education. however, they did not succeed fully in their endeavour, but it had a great impact on the British rulers. Contribution of the Basic Education Scheme was also noteworthy.

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