

The right to education and equal access to quality education

Education is universally acknowledged as a fundamental human right, essential to the exercise of all other rights. The right to education and equal access to quality education are crucial for individual empowerment, societal progress, and the achievement of social justice. Over the decades, both globally and within India, significant strides have been made to enhance educational accessibility and quality. Yet, disparities remain stark and persistent. The global narrative offers a varied perspective across different regions, reflecting political will, socio-economic conditions, and institutional frameworks. In contrast, India's scenario is shaped by historical inequalities, demographic challenges, and ambitious yet often inadequately implemented reforms. This essay seeks to examine the global framework of the right to education and quality access, juxtaposing it with the Indian context, highlighting contrasts, challenges, and possible paths forward.

Globally, the right to education is enshrined in key international instruments. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) asserts in Article 26 that "everyone has the right to education," emphasizing free and compulsory elementary education. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) further expands this by recognizing the right to education as a tool for full human development and dignity. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" by 2030. Most developed nations and a number of developing ones have implemented strong public education systems supported by consistent funding, trained teachers, child-centered learning policies, and mechanisms to ensure inclusion. Nordic countries like Finland, Denmark, and Sweden consistently top the global education rankings due to their emphasis on equality, accessibility, innovation, and respect for the learner's individuality.

However, on a global scale, disparities remain prevalent, particularly between high-income and low-income countries. Sub-Saharan Africa, parts of South Asia, and conflict-affected regions continue to struggle with access, dropout rates, gender disparities, and poor infrastructure. According to UNESCO, over 244 million children and youth were out of school worldwide in 2021. Even in high-income countries, systemic discrimination persists against marginalized communities such as immigrants, ethnic minorities, indigenous populations, and children with disabilities. For instance, in the United States, socio-economic background significantly affects the quality of education received, especially in underfunded public schools.

In contrast, India presents a distinctive scenario deeply rooted in its socio-political history and constitutional ethos. The Indian Constitution, under Article 21A, guarantees the right to free and compulsory education for children aged six to fourteen years, introduced through the 86th Constitutional Amendment in 2002. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009 operationalized this right, mandating norms on infrastructure, teacher-student ratio, and non-discrimination in schools. Additionally, Article 15 and 46 of the Constitution mandate the state to promote educational interests of Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and other socially and educationally backward classes.

India's commitment to education is further reflected in its extensive policy frameworks. The National Policy on Education (1986, revised 1992), Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Mid-Day Meal Scheme, and most recently, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 are designed to enhance access, equity, and

quality in education. NEP 2020 proposes a transformative approach focusing on foundational literacy and numeracy, curriculum revamp, early childhood care, and inclusive education.

Yet, despite such progressive measures, India's education system grapples with significant challenges. Firstly, there exists a vast urban-rural divide. While urban centers boast better-equipped schools and digital resources, rural areas often suffer from a shortage of qualified teachers, inadequate infrastructure, and high dropout rates. Secondly, the quality of education remains inconsistent. Learning outcomes, particularly in government schools, are alarmingly low. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2023 revealed that many children in Grade 5 could not perform basic arithmetic or read texts meant for lower grades.

Furthermore, issues of caste-based discrimination, gender disparities, and economic exclusion continue to undermine equal access. Although affirmative action and reservation policies have improved the participation of SCs, STs, and OBCs in education, deep-seated prejudices and socio-economic constraints persist. Girls, particularly in rural areas and among marginalized communities, often face early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and safety concerns that hinder their education. Children with disabilities are frequently excluded from mainstream schooling due to lack of infrastructure, trained personnel, and inclusive teaching methods.

Private schooling in India also introduces another layer of inequality. The mushrooming of private schools, often perceived as superior in quality, has created a dual system where the affluent have access to better education while the poor are left with under-resourced public schools. The RTE Act mandates 25% reservation for economically weaker sections in private unaided schools, but its implementation has been patchy, often marred by bureaucratic hurdles, resistance from schools, and lack of awareness among beneficiaries.

Comparatively, many developed nations have succeeded in establishing relatively uniform public education systems that minimize socio-economic disparities. For instance, Finland abolished private schools to create a unified education system that offers the same high-quality education to all children regardless of background. Public investment in education, community engagement, teacher training, and student-centric pedagogy are cornerstones of such systems.

In developing regions outside India, similar struggles are apparent, but some countries have demonstrated innovative responses. Rwanda, for instance, post-genocide, prioritized education as a tool for nation-building and equity. It invested heavily in universal primary education, gender parity, and community participation. Vietnam has emerged as a model of successful education reform through policy consistency, teacher training, and curriculum development, despite being a lower-middle-income country.

Another major contrast is seen in the integration of technology in education. Globally, countries have leveraged technology to bridge educational gaps, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, digital education in India exposed severe digital divides. Millions of students lacked access to devices, stable internet, and digital literacy, leading to massive learning losses. This was particularly detrimental to students from economically weaker backgrounds, tribal belts, and remote villages.

Moreover, global education systems increasingly emphasize holistic development, mental health, critical thinking, and 21st-century skills, whereas the Indian system still struggles to move away from rote learning, outdated curricula, and examination-centric evaluation. Although NEP 2020 seeks to

address these issues, its success will depend on political will, adequate funding, and grassroots-level implementation.

Another key area of contrast is inclusive education. In countries like Canada and New Zealand, inclusion is deeply embedded in the education system, ensuring children with diverse learning needs, disabilities, and backgrounds are accommodated through tailored support. India has policies promoting inclusive education, but implementation remains weak. Resource centers, special educators, and teacher sensitization are grossly inadequate in the Indian public education system.

Financing of education also marks a significant divergence. The global benchmark for public investment in education is around 6% of GDP. Scandinavian countries exceed this, ensuring robust public education systems. India, however, has consistently fallen short, allocating around 2.9% to 3.1% of its GDP to education, which severely limits the scope for improvement in infrastructure, teacher recruitment, and quality enhancement.

While the global and Indian scenarios share some common challenges, such as disparities in access, inclusion, and quality, the degree and context vary significantly. Globally, nations that prioritize equitable education through sustained investment, inclusive policies, and community engagement tend to achieve better outcomes. India has made commendable progress in terms of constitutional commitment and policy frameworks, but practical execution remains its Achilles' heel. Bridging the urban-rural divide, improving learning outcomes, ensuring digital inclusion, empowering teachers, and securing adequate funding are critical to advancing the right to education in India. The contrast reveals that while India aligns with global goals in principle, the pathway to actualizing equal access to quality education remains complex and urgent. A nuanced and sustained approach is required, one that goes beyond policy rhetoric and addresses ground-level realities with conviction and care.

The right to education and equal access to quality education affect the population at its core by shaping individual capabilities, determining socio-economic mobility, and influencing the broader fabric of society. These rights are not just legal guarantees—they are foundational to the development of a just, informed, and equitable society. Their impact can be analyzed across several key dimensions:

1. Empowerment and Individual Growth

Education is a primary tool for personal empowerment. It equips individuals with knowledge, critical thinking, and skills necessary to participate fully in society. For marginalized groups—such as women, minorities, and the economically disadvantaged—access to quality education provides a means to challenge systemic inequality and assert their rights. The right to education enables people to make informed decisions about health, employment, family, and political participation, leading to holistic human development.

2. Breaking the Cycle of Poverty

Equal access to education is a powerful mechanism to reduce poverty. When children from underprivileged backgrounds are provided the same quality education as their affluent peers, they are better positioned to secure jobs, earn stable incomes, and support their families. Education improves employability and productivity, which in turn contributes to economic growth. Without this right being properly realized, entire generations risk being trapped in poverty, perpetuating a cycle that is hard to break.

3. Reducing Social Inequality

Education levels the playing field in societies divided by caste, class, gender, or race. In countries like India, where historical discrimination has excluded large sections of the population from opportunities, ensuring equal access to education is a fundamental step toward social justice. Reservation policies, inclusive curricula, and equitable school infrastructure are intended to close these gaps. When implemented effectively, they reduce social stratification and promote dignity, respect, and inclusion.

4. Public Health and Social Awareness

Educated populations tend to have better health outcomes. Basic education leads to greater awareness about hygiene, nutrition, reproductive health, and disease prevention. Literate parents are more likely to ensure vaccinations, follow medical advice, and seek healthcare when needed. Women's education, in particular, correlates strongly with lower infant mortality, improved child nutrition, and family planning. Thus, the right to education is intrinsically linked to healthier populations.

5. Political Participation and Democratic Strength

Education fosters civic consciousness and encourages active participation in democratic processes. An informed citizenry is more likely to engage in voting, demand transparency, and hold governments accountable. When the right to education is realized, individuals can better understand laws, policies, and their own constitutional rights. This strengthens democratic governance and helps create societies based on rule of law and informed consent.

6. Economic Development and National Productivity

On a macro level, widespread access to quality education enhances a nation's human capital. Educated workforces drive innovation, entrepreneurship, and competitiveness. Countries that invest in education tend to experience faster economic development and are better equipped to adapt to technological changes and global market demands. Conversely, educational inequality leads to an underutilized workforce, economic inefficiencies, and reduced national output.

7. Social Cohesion and Conflict Reduction

Education promotes tolerance, dialogue, and empathy. By bringing together children from diverse backgrounds in inclusive settings, schools play a role in reducing prejudices and promoting peaceful coexistence. In societies plagued by conflict, education can be a tool for reconciliation and nation-building. When access to education is denied to specific groups, it fuels resentment, social unrest, and division.

8. Intergenerational Impact

The effects of education extend beyond the individual. Educated parents are more likely to educate their children, creating a ripple effect across generations. This intergenerational transmission of knowledge and values fosters long-term societal transformation. The absence of educational rights perpetuates underachievement and disadvantage from one generation to the next.

In summary, the right to education and equal access to quality education directly influence the social, economic, and moral core of the population. They determine who gets opportunities, how power is distributed, and how inclusive a society can be. When upheld, these rights build resilient, fair, and prosperous communities. When denied or poorly implemented, they deepen divides and

suppress human potential. Therefore, these rights are not abstract entitlements—they are the foundation upon which personal dignity and national progress are built.

Scope of Social Reform in India in Terms of Equal Educational Rights: The Scenario of 2025 and Onwards

As India progresses into 2025 and beyond, the pursuit of equal educational rights stands at a transformative crossroads. With rapid socio-economic changes, digital advancements, and evolving policy frameworks, there is unprecedented potential for meaningful social reform. However, deep-rooted structural inequalities, uneven resource distribution, and the urban-rural divide continue to challenge the realization of truly equal education for all. The scope for social reform in the Indian context must therefore address not only policy and institutional mechanisms but also social attitudes, access, and implementation efficiency. This evolving landscape presents both opportunities and imperatives for redefining educational equity in more inclusive and outcome-oriented ways.

1. Implementation of NEP 2020 as a Pillar of Reform

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 presents a comprehensive vision for inclusive, equitable, and holistic education. The scope for reform now lies in translating its vision into real impact. From 2025 onward, policy implementation must prioritize marginalized groups—particularly Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs), religious minorities, girls, and children with disabilities. By restructuring curricula, promoting multilingual learning, ensuring foundational literacy, and making early childhood education universal, NEP can act as a social equalizer if effectively monitored and funded.

2. Digital Inclusion and Bridging the Technology Divide

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the stark digital divide in Indian education. Reform going forward must center around ensuring digital equity. With growing internet penetration and mobile use, the government has the opportunity to establish inclusive EdTech ecosystems. Investment in rural digital infrastructure, low-cost devices, and vernacular digital content must be institutionalized to ensure that technology acts as a bridge, not a barrier. Training teachers and students in digital literacy is crucial to future-proofing education systems.

3. Strengthening Public Education and Reducing Privatisation Gaps

The rising dependence on private schooling has worsened educational inequalities. A significant area for social reform lies in revitalizing the public education system. From 2025 onward, states must allocate higher budgets to upgrade government schools—ensuring trained teachers, modern classrooms, and accountability. Reducing the performance gap between private and public schools would reduce dependence on financial capacity and promote merit-based outcomes. The focus should shift from infrastructure alone to outcome-based reforms, teacher empowerment, and consistent evaluation.

4. Inclusive and Special Needs Education as a Core Priority

Another dimension of future reform is the integration of children with disabilities and special learning needs into mainstream schooling. While the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 mandates inclusive education, implementation remains weak. Post-2025 reforms must ensure the provision of resource centers, special educators, assistive technology, and inclusive pedagogy across

all schools. Inclusive education should be embedded into teacher training curricula and monitored with dedicated funding.

5. Gender-Based Educational Reforms and Safety Measures

Despite progress, gender inequality persists, especially in rural India. Post-2025 reform must address structural barriers like child marriage, gendered violence, and dropout rates among adolescent girls. The scope includes expanding residential schools for girls, gender-sensitive facilities, and stronger implementation of schemes like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao and Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas. Gender inclusion must go beyond enrolment to focus on retention, quality, and empowerment.

6. Caste and Community-Based Equity in Access

Caste-based discrimination in schools—ranging from segregation to teacher bias—continues to deter equality. The future scope of reform lies in strengthening anti-discrimination mechanisms, implementing sensitization programs for educators, and ensuring proper application of reservation quotas. Educational equity must extend to marginalized religious minorities and tribal populations through context-specific interventions. Reforms must also ensure that admissions under the 25% quota of the RTE Act in private schools are fully realized and monitored.

7. Regional and Linguistic Equity

India's federal structure offers both challenges and opportunities. Educational rights must be regionally adapted, particularly in underdeveloped states like Bihar, Jharkhand, and parts of the Northeast. Regional parity must be supported by centrally funded programs and performance-linked grants. Promoting mother-tongue instruction as outlined in NEP 2020 is critical to improving learning outcomes in tribal and remote areas.

8. Community Participation and Decentralized Governance

Sustainable reform depends on the involvement of communities. Post-2025, there is an increasing need to strengthen School Management Committees (SMCs), empower local governance structures, and foster community-led monitoring of schools. Transparency tools such as social audits, school report cards, and grievance redressal systems must be institutionalized to hold systems accountable and ensure inclusiveness.

9. Data-Driven Policy and Real-Time Monitoring

To address inequality effectively, reforms must be guided by evidence. From 2025 onwards, India should invest in real-time, disaggregated data on enrolment, attendance, learning outcomes, infrastructure, and teacher performance across different demographics. The use of Artificial Intelligence and data analytics in identifying learning gaps and targeting support to vulnerable students holds immense promise for inclusive education reform.

10. Increasing Public Expenditure on Education

The current spending of around 3% of GDP on education falls short of both the Kothari Commission recommendation and the NEP 2020 target of 6%. A key area of reform lies in enhancing this allocation and ensuring efficient utilization. Increased funds should prioritize rural and underserved schools, digital infrastructure, training, and inclusive programs. Financial reform must also ensure timely disbursement of scholarships and support schemes for economically weaker sections.

11. Re-imagining Assessments and Outcomes

India's education system has long been criticized for promoting rote learning. Future reforms must

continue the shift toward competency-based assessments, continuous evaluation, and skills-based learning. Exams should measure understanding, creativity, and problem-solving abilities rather than memory. Reforms should ensure that assessment systems do not become gatekeepers of exclusion, especially for first-generation learners.

12. Promoting Lifelong Learning and Adult Education

Equal educational rights must extend beyond childhood. The future reform agenda should include adult education, skilling programs, and vocational training, particularly for women, rural youth, and unorganized workers. As the nature of work evolves, flexible learning pathways and second-chance education initiatives will become essential for inclusive growth.

From 2025 onwards, the scope of social reform in India in terms of equal educational rights lies in sustained and inclusive transformation. Policies like NEP 2020 offer a blueprint, but realization depends on political commitment, financial investment, community engagement, and institutional reform. Technology, if leveraged inclusively, can bridge gaps—but only if supported by infrastructure and training. Reforms must focus not just on access, but on equity, quality, and outcomes. A truly equal education system in India will be one where every child, regardless of caste, class, gender, ability, or location, can learn with dignity, thrive with opportunity, and contribute meaningfully to society. The path ahead is challenging, but with deliberate and inclusive action, it is possible to move from policy to justice—ensuring education becomes not just a right in words, but a lived reality for all.