A Failed Investment: Why the Education Expansion Policies of India's First Five-Year Plan were Unable to Decrease Income Inequality and Increase Social Mobility

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"Basic education links the children, whether of the cities or the villages, to all that is best and lasting in India." -Mahatma Gandhi, 1941.[1]

Six years before Indian liberation, Mahatma Gandhi addressed the Indian National Congress on the necessity of education as a gateway to success. For the preceding 184 years, India had been subjected to the exploitation of the British Raj, as Britain used India to supply raw materials and enrich the British market, and in turn, left much of India naked. Not only was India undergoing extreme economic exploitation, but it was also stripped of the ability to organically develop its own education system. For 106 years, India had been operating under an education system installed by the British Raj, whose sole function was to indoctrinate wealthy Indian children into state positions, "helping the colonizer collect revenue."[2] This system was not to enlighten India, rather, it served to oppress it. Mahatma Gandhi, India's most prominent freedom fighter, saw an urgent need for the replacement of the British Raj's education system.

However, Gandhi saw a new education system as more than freedom from British oppression: he saw it as a means for every Indian child, regardless of class, to build success for themselves and the country. Similarly, post-independence, India's leaders advocated for an education policy that would "set the nation on the path of progress and prosperity" and aimed to "unleash the potential of India's civilization by a process of intellectual decolonization."[3] To do this, a branch of the new Central Government of India, called the Indian Planning Commission (IPC) and formed in 1950, had as its primary responsibility to create a series of five-year plans which would set goals and allot funds to fuel the country's economic growth. During the incipient plans, exact data regarding economic inequality and social mobility was not recorded, so there is no way to confirm exactly how effective the first five-year plan was. A primary focus of the first plan was policies that would finance and shape primary and secondary education, one of the main avenues which the Commission wished to use to unleash the Indian population's potential. While it is true that the first five-year plan's primary and secondary education policies caused the expansion of the higher education system, the IPC was not able to reduce economic inequality and increase social mobility solely through its educational expansion policies. They failed to fulfill the increased demand for academic resources and were unable to remedy outside socioeconomic factors that hindered students' engagement in school; poorer students were not able to reap the intended benefits of the education policies.

The Proliferation of Higher Education

The first five-year plan (1951-1956), through its educational policies, increased social mobility and decreased income inequality for many; this is shown by the increased enrollment in higher education following the years of the plan. The IPC, at the beginning of the plan, announced that they were not creating any policy, or "targets" for higher education, as the problem was one of organization and consolidation; expansion was not necessary.[4] Because no changes were made to promote or decrease university-level education by the first five-year plan, any effect on the growth of the higher education system was catalyzed by increased demand from graduates of secondary education. One can deduce that any higher education expansion seen was a direct result of growth in primary and secondary education.

The geographic nature of higher education expansion showed that a diverse population of Indian people were impacted. From 1950 to 1960, enrollment in higher education increased by 220%.[5] This growth includes four years following the end of the first five-year plan in 1956; during these years, those who had entered primary and secondary education as a result of the expansion policies of the first five-year plan would be entering higher education. In addition to student presence, there was an increase in the number of higher education institutions themselves: a 214% increase in the number of colleges and a 60% increase in the number of universities.[6] The opening of these colleges and universities also illuminates the increase in demand for higher education. Meanwhile, this expansion in number of schools was not mirrored in institution size: "the average size of an Indian higher education institution in terms of enrollment was much smaller (500-600) compared to that of Europe and the US (3,000-4,000) and China (8,000-9,000)."[7] Despite India's similarity in population to China, India's institutions of higher education were created on a much smaller scale. The large increase in small institutions demonstrated the widespread geographical demand for higher education. Fewer, but larger, universities would have opened if concentrated urban demand for education was growing. This reveals that students in both urban and rural communities were completing secondary education and entering higher education institutions as a result of the first five-year plan.

This increase in higher education represented the opening of many doors for India's citizens. For all of these students, but especially poor rural students, higher education was a direct pipeline to upward social mobility, especially for members of the lower class.[8] When students from rural and poor areas are given access to primary and secondary education which is effective in leading them to higher education, they gain access to opportunities in the workforce. For example, as Indian industrialization began after the country's independence, "the need for technically trained and competent administrative personnel became urgent. As a result, during the past one decade [1957-1967], there has been increasing awareness of the need for providing facilities of training in management."[9] Since its implementation, the first five-year plan had been creating economic growth in industries other than education, such as industrial and agricultural sectors. Employers recognized that to acquire the most efficient workforce, their employees had to be educated properly. As the value of a degree from higher education grew in the years following the first

five-year plan, poorer college graduates were able to find skilled jobs to which they had not previously had access. In addition, since these jobs were skilled and specialized positions, degree-holders had opportunities to be paid a significantly higher income than unskilled laborers. In theory, degrees—made accessible by primary and secondary education—decreased the income inequality of the country while increasing the individual's social mobility.

Success In the Classroom: Unequal Access to Facilities, Curricula, and Teachers

The IPC's education policies in the first five-year plan did not reduce economic inequality or increase social mobility because of their inability to provide academic resources—such as facilities, curricula, and teachers—which were needed to fulfill the mandated expansion policies.

The first five-year plan's building development policies were not effective, as for many years following the plan, a large disparity continued to be found in academic facilities. A first-hand account from an American economist visiting India, collected during the years of the third five-year plan, found that "buildings and equipment ranged from ultramodern in a few cases to tents and ground-mats to sit on in the case of one of Delhi's largest high schools."[10] This account reveals the inadequacy of the allocation of the first five-year plan's funding: while a few smaller urban high schools were modern, most of the big high schools in New Delhi, a major Indian city, still consisted of tents and were not even under construction by the third five-year plan. These primitive education environments suggest that very few urban schools for poor students would have undergone brick-and-mortar improvements during the first five-year plan. Even worse was the status of rural village schools. In many places, the school space was either an obsolete building, such as a converted house or an old servants' quarter; or, if there were no available structures, school was held under a tree.[11] Rural schools, which required the greatest funding to meet the Commission and the constitution's goals, had also undergone few changes since the start of the first five-year plan. Without adequate facilities, poor students in both urban and rural areas could not receive a consistent, high-quality education; consequently, they did not gain the skills to meet the demands of higher education or professions. Meanwhile, students of wealthy backgrounds continued to have access to economic opportunities. Social mobility did not increase and overall income inequality did not decrease because of the lack of funding for educational facilities in the first five-year plan.

Second, the first five-year plan did not initiate improvement to poor students' curricula—there was no mandated revision to any existing curricula nor any universal plan implemented to re-write it—perpetuating students' unequal academic achievement. The curriculum in public schools at the start of the plan, which was "imported from an entirely different culture," was not "even in the beginning, designed for Indian needs."[12] The existing institutions in India were still teaching lessons designed during the British Raj, which were taught in English (as opposed to indigenous languages) and exclusively prepared wealthy Indian children for state positions.[13] Another defect of the remaining British system was its "biased approaches favoring the religiously motivated missionary enterprise in education," as the British also employed Anglican religious indoctrination in their exploitation of India.[14] The curriculum used religion to persuade the Indian people of their loyalty to the British state and did not encourage other schools of thought or foster Indian nationalism. Despite the curriculum's irrelevance, the first five-year plan did not set aside money to finance any kind of revision, resulting in two major problems. First,

despite the absence of British rule, there was still a pervasive social internalization that "people who received English education viewed themselves as superior as compared to those who were not educated under this system," resulting in the division of society over differences in curriculum.[15] These leftover prejudices ensured that poor children educated in fledgling public schools founded by the Commission were barred from opportunities, unlike their wealthy counterparts.[16] Second, there was a deficit of vocational education and curriculum diversity because the British Raj initiated only one vocation—state work—and left the rest of the country to unskilled agricultural work.[17] These two concerns became immediately clear after the implementation of the first five-year plan; as a result, the Secondary Education System, formed to remedy issues of the first five-year plan, made goals to "provide a wider and more balanced course," "adoption of the mother tongue," and giving craftwork an "honored place in the school curriculum."[18] These changes would ultimately reduce the prejudice issues and knowledge gaps left from the Raj's education system; however, this would not occur until funding from the second and third five-year plans became available.

The last reason why the IPC's education policies were not effective is that they did not train a sufficient number of teachers to fulfill their expansion policies. India had created a higher demand than they had a supply for teachers: "the inadequate supply of competent and experienced personnel creates a bottleneck, as training facilities and educational standards cannot be stepped up suddenly."[19] As the Commission opened up schools, they did not have capable teachers to foster a nurturing environment for all students, because there was not a large output of educators from Indian institutions to begin with. This was in part due to the unfavorable social status of teachers, in addition to the aforementioned lack of vocational training. Instead, "many of the new schools were being staffed with unpaid teachers, [...] having only high school training or less."[20] The Indian government relied chiefly on high school graduates to provide education in the newest schools, which generally served poorer communities. While this education was superior to none at all, these inexperienced teachers did not adequately engage and prepare children for their next levels of schooling, and consequently, many students were still not able to take advantage of higher education. The widespread inability of students to continue schooling and achieve higher-paying jobs meant that social mobility and inequality went unchanged.

Engagement Blocks: Low Attendance and High Dropout Rates

The IPC's first five-year plan's educational policies did not address factors outside of the systemic organization of education; this impacted students' engagement in school and their resulting financial success. Consequently, poorer families did not gain opportunities—social mobility did not increase—and Indian income inequality was not improved. The first five-year plan worked to make education available to the impoverished populations of India through "reserved vacancies for scheduled [lower] castes"; however, the plan failed to make education accessible to these individuals—"allowed quotas were not being filled."[21] The Planning Commission opened spots for poor students to fill, but they were not taken. This was because of outside-of-the-classroom factors that the Planning Commission failed to consider, such as the impact of socioeconomic background on engagement in school and the barrier of outside costs.

One reason for the lack of lower-caste engagement was the difference in the value of education

between wealthy and poor Indians. There was "in India a direct relationship between caste and educational attainments on the one hand, and caste and occupational attainments on the other."[22] In addition, socioeconomic status also determined one's focus on their education: "educated families place greater value on the education of their children and as they pass on from one generation to another, the chances of the success of the child are also rated higher, owing to the influence of heredity and environment."[23] This highlights that educated parents—who tended to be wealthy and of higher caste—passed the value of education onto their children because it had been proven to benefit them. If a child lives in a comfortable environment in which priority can be placed on school, not on survival, they are likely to be successful and continue in their schooling. Conversely, poverty at home reduced academic success: being lower caste had a heavy correlation with dropping out. The Agricultural Research Center of the Delhi University found that, in Harijans (a poor, backward caste), had higher dropout rates than non-harijans; in addition, the rate of participation in school was lower among Harijan students.[24] Impoverished students, because of their focus on immediate survival, did not even attempt to attend school at all; if they did, they still did not properly engage in their education. This left students with poor exam grades and a lack of foundational skills, which discouraged further education and caused high dropout rates. This inability to engage in school as a result of socioeconomic status was the most prominent reason why spots made available by the five-year plan were not filled; consequently, poor children continued to fall into low-income jobs and did not gain social mobility. Furthermore, since wealthy children were able to continue engaging in their schooling, they also continued to hold the majority of high-income jobs, meaning that income inequality remained stagnant.

Another reason why lower-caste students were prevented from filling these spots was that they could not afford to pay for the outside costs of education. Poor families could not pay for resources that were essential for schooling, such as "fees, textbook, stationery and noon meals in elementary education."[25] By removing the barrier of these outside costs, students would have an easier time in school, would be more likely to pass, and would be more likely to continue with their education to gain a high-paying job and escape their social class. The first five-year plan did allow for these subsidies by using government funding to award grants to poor students. However, even when students who applied for grants were authorized by the government, students did not receive them because of "officers who had neither interest in nor knowledge about the problems of the scheduled castes."[26] As a result, a large portion of these grant funds was "never used and lapsed every year."[27] The first five-year plan's lazy implementation of subsidization resulted in children who required aid the most not receiving it. The Commission on Secondary Education, formed by the IPC to further reorganize education after the first plan, included in their first report goals to correct this failure. For example, the Commission on Secondary Education called for "a special committee to attack the problem of providing textbooks," and "legislative measures to provide for [...] customs duty tax exemption on supplies and equipment."[28] Unfortunately, these measures would be delayed until funding from the second or third five-year plans was available. In the short term, the subsidization policies of the first five-year plan were not effective in raising enrollment or decreasing dropouts of the poor, and consequently, did not increase overall mobility or decrease economic inequality.

What the First Five-Year Plan Should Mean to India Today

In the short term, the first five-year plan was unsuccessful in its attempts to make education accessible by expanding primary and secondary education. Despite the many missteps of the first five-year plan in reducing income inequality and increasing social mobility, many believed that the rapid expansion it did create, however misguided, was an indication of imminent success. Around the close of the first five-year plan, the world had high expectations for the future of Indian education: American economist Hugh B. Wood believed that "to one accustomed to the lethargic movement of educational reform in the United States [...], education is expanded with jet speed, and reforms are likely to come quite as rapidly within the next few years."[29] Wood saw that reforms were being made quickly and efficiently, at a rate even faster than the US, asserting that India would quickly be on par with other education systems in the world. Wood's projection holds within Gershenkron's theory of the leaders, the followers, and the backward: backward India should have developed at an extreme rate as it caught up to the followers (such as the US) and the leaders (such as Britain).

Interestingly, India's education system today is far from satisfactory; the country had taken a hard fall off of the trajectory predicted by Wood and Gerschenkron in the years following independence. In fact, India's academic prowess is among the worst in the world: "In the 2009 PISA survey of the reading, math and science abilities of children in 74 countries, India ranked second-to-last, beating only Kyrgyzstan. Since then, it has refused to participate in the survey."[30] The Indian education system has been beaten on the floor, unmoved, for decades.

However, India has recently been presented with a gift that could profoundly transform the country: new minds. According to the 2011 census, 41% of the population of India is currently under the age of 19.[31] This enormous concentration of young people—if they can access education—is India's key to revitalizing economic growth and unlocking prosperity. To reinvigorate and redirect themselves toward this transition, the Indian government of 2022 should look back into its history at the newly-independent, optimistic IPC of 1951 for two reasons. First, contemporary India should be inspired by the 1951 Commission's ambition because the two governments have identical needs—a skilled workforce to bolster the economy and an informed democracy—and challenges—an enormous, heavily-stratified population, a large rural class, and damage from exploitative and corrupt entities. Second, and most importantly, contemporary India should examine the 1951 Commission because the errors and ignorances that marred the success of the first plan five-year plan can now inform a successful educational expansion in 2022. India is at a pivotal moment, and it must listen to the lessons of its history to finally complete what the 1951 IPC had begun.

Notes

1. M. K. Gandhi, *Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place* (Ahmedabad, India, 1945), 9.

2. Aziz Rahman, Mohsin Ali, and Saad Kahn, "The British Art of Colonialism in India: Subjugation and Division," *Peace and Conflict Studies* 25, no. 1 (2018), 11.

3. K. N. Panikkar, "India's Education Policy: From National to Commercial," *Economic and Political Weekly* 46, no. 17 (April 2011), 38.

4. Hugh B. Wood, "Education in India under the Five-Year Plan," *The Elementary School Journal* 55, no. 9 (May 1955), 523.

5. Ved Prakash, "Trends in Growth and Financing of Higher Education in India," *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no. 31 (August 2007), 3250.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., 3251.

8. Ibid., 3257.

9. M. V. Pylee, "Management Education In India," *Management Science* 13, no. 10 (June 1967), 209.

10. Hugh B. Wood, "Secondary Education in India," *The School Review* 62, no. 7 (October 1954), 403.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., 404.

13. Rahman, Ali, Khan, "The British Art of Colonialism," 11-12.

14. Jandhyala B. G. Tilak, review of *Primary Education, Population Growth and Socio-Economic Change*, by P. R. Gopinathan Nair, *Economic and Political Weekly* 17, no. 35 (August 1982), 1413.

15. Rahman, Ali, Khan, "The British Art of Colonialism," 8.

16. Ibid., 10.

17. Hugh B. Wood, "Secondary Education in India," 404.

18. Humayun Kabir, “Secondary Education in India: An Overview,” *The Journal of Educational Sociology* 28, no. 5 (January 1955), 196.

19. N. A. Sarma, “Economic Development in India: The First and Second Five Year Plans,” *Staff Papers (International Monetary Fund)* 6, no. 2 (April 1958), 188-189.

20. Wood, “Education in India under the Five-Year Plan,” 523.

21. Mathew Zachariah, “Positive Discrimination in Education for India's Scheduled Castes: A Review of the Problems, 1950-1970,” *Comparative Education Review* 16, no. 1 (February 1972), 27.

22. Jandhyala B. G. Tilak, “Inequality in Education in India,” *Indian Journal of Industrial Relations* 14, no. 3 (January 1979), 424.

23. S. C. Goel, “Education and Economic Growth in India,” *Comparative Education* 10, no. 2 (June 1974), 150.

24. Tilak, “Inequality in Education in India,” 422.

25. Jandhyala B. G. Tilak, “Public Subsidies in Education in India,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 39, no. 4 (January 2004), 356.

26. Zachariah, “Positive Discrimination,” 23.

27. Ibid.

28. Wood, “Education in India under the Five-Year Plan,” 524.

29. Ibid.

30. Geeta Kingdon, Opinion, “Indian Schools are Failing Their Students,” *New York Times,* December 15, 2015.

31. Ibid.

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