

Assessing the Transformative Potential of Free and Compulsory Education in India: A Systematic Review

Hemlata¹, Dr. Mithlesh Kumar Yadav²

¹Research Scholar IIMT University Meerut (UP)

²Assistant Professor IIMT University Meerut (UP)

Abstract:

Free and compulsory education in India represents a constitutional commitment to equity, social justice, and inclusive development under Article 21A and the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009. This systematic review examines the transformative potential of this rights-based framework by analysing scholarly literature, policy documents, and implementation studies published in the post-RTE period. The review highlights significant achievements, including increased enrollment rates, improved gender parity, infrastructure development, and enhanced access for marginalized communities through inclusive provisions such as Section 12(1)(c). However, persistent challenges remain, particularly in relation to learning outcomes, teacher capacity, regional disparities, and implementation gaps. The findings suggest that while access to schooling has substantially improved, the goal of meaningful and equitable learning is yet to be fully realized. The study emphasizes the need for stronger quality-focused reforms, policy integration with the National Education Policy 2020, and strengthened monitoring mechanisms to ensure that free and compulsory education, fulfils its transformative social mandate.

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

1. Introduction

The recognition of the Right to Education as a fundamental right represents a landmark development in India's democratic and developmental journey. With the enactment of the Constitution (Eighty-sixth Amendment) Act, 2002, Article 21A was inserted into the Constitution, imposing a constitutional obligation on the State to provide free and compulsory education to all children between the ages of six and fourteen years. This amendment signified a decisive shift in India's approach to education, elevating it from a directive principle of governance to a legally enforceable right integral to the right to life and human dignity under Article 21.

The constitutional mandate under Article 21A was operationalized through the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, which came into force on 1 April 2010. The RTE Act provides a comprehensive legal framework that clearly defines the roles and responsibilities of the State, local authorities, schools, teachers, and parents in ensuring universal elementary 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.

Within the broader framework of social transformation, education functions as a powerful catalyst for equity, empowerment, and human development. Universal access to elementary education is widely recognized as essential for breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty, reducing social exclusion, and fostering inclusive growth. 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. By examining achievements alongside persistent challenges, the review aims to provide a balanced evaluation of India's progress toward realizing the constitutional vision of education as a foundation for equitable and inclusive social transformation.

2. Conceptual Framework: Education and Social Transformation

Education is globally acknowledged as a fundamental instrument of social transformation, functioning as a mean 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.

In the Indian context, the relationship between education and social transformation is deeply embedded in constitutional philosophy. The framers of the Constitution envisioned education as a foundational element for building an egalitarian social order. However, at the time of adoption of the Constitution, education was placed under Article 45 as a Directive Principle of State Policy, which obligated the State to endeavour to provide free and compulsory education to children up to the age of fourteen years. While morally binding, Directive Principles were non-justiciable, limiting their enforceability and practical impact. As a result, educational access remained uneven, particularly among marginalized groups such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, minorities, and economically weaker sections.

The constitutional transition from Article 45 to Article 21A, introduced through the Eighty-Sixth Constitutional Amendment Act, 2002, represents a paradigmatic shift in India's educational framework. By elevating education to the status of a fundamental right, the State assumed a legally enforceable obligation to ensure free and compulsory education for all children aged 6–14 years. This shift marked a transformation from a welfare-oriented approach to a rights-based framework, reinforcing education as an entitlement rather than a discretionary benefit. Legal scholars argue that this constitutionalization of

education reflects India's commitment to aligning social policy with principles of dignity, equality, and justice enshrined under Article 21 (Right to Life and Personal Liberty).

The enactment of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (RTE Act) operationalized Article 21A by defining the responsibilities of the State, schools, teachers, and parents. The Act conceptualizes education not only in terms of access but also in terms of quality, equity, and inclusiveness. Provisions relating to neighbourhood 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 labour, 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. The reservation of 25 percent seats for economically weaker sections in private unaided schools under Section 12(1)(c) of the RTE Act illustrates an explicit attempt to promote social integration and equity within the education system.

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. Scholars caution that without addressing systemic challenges such as teacher shortages, regional disparities, and learning deficits, the transformative promise of free and compulsory education may remain only partially realized.

Thus, within this framework, free and compulsory education in India can be understood as a multi-dimensional transformative project—one that combines constitutional morality, social justice, and human development objectives. The shift from a directive principle to a fundamental right symbolizes a deepened commitment to social transformation, while the RTE Act provides the institutional mechanism to translate this commitment into practice. 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.

3. Methodology

This study employs a systematic review approach to examine the transformative potential of free and compulsory education in India. The review is based on a comprehensive analysis of academic literature, policy documents, and official government reports, primarily published over the last decade. This time frame captures the post-implementation phase of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, as well as subsequent developments in India's education policy framework.

3.1 Sources of Data

Data for the review were collected from a wide range of credible sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, national policy documents, and reports published by recognized institutions such as the Ministry of Education, Government of India, UNICEF, UNESCO, and other international

organizations. Legal interpretations and constitutional analyses were drawn from authoritative commentaries and judicial decisions relating to Article 21A of the Constitution of India and the RTE Act.

3.2 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. In addition, the reference lists of selected studies were examined to identify further relevant sources.

3.3 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.

3.4 Data Analysis

The selected literature was analysed 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, enabling a comprehensive assessment of the transformative role of free and compulsory education in India.

3.5 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. Despite these limitations, the systematic selection and analysis of authoritative sources provide a robust basis for evaluating the social and educational impact of free and compulsory education in India.

4. Achievements of Free and Compulsory Education in India

The implementation of free and compulsory education under Article 21A and the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 represents a significant milestone in India’s efforts toward social transformation. 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.

4.1 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 Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) at both primary and 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 Act's emphasis on universal access has also contributed to a significant reduction in the number of out-of-school children, especially in rural and socio-economically disadvantaged regions. 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.

4.2 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.

4.3 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). This provision mandates that private unaided schools reserve 25 percent of seats at the entry level for children belonging to economically weaker sections (EWS) and disadvantaged groups, with reimbursement provided by the state. 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. These child-centric provisions aim to create a supportive and inclusive educational environment, particularly for

first-generation learners, children from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, minorities, and migrant populations.

Taken together, the achievements of free and compulsory education in India demonstrate meaningful progress toward the goals of universal access, equity, and inclusion. 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.

5. Persistent Challenges in Implementation

While the constitutional recognition of education as a fundamental right and the enactment of the RTE Act have significantly expanded access to elementary education, the implementation of free and compulsory education in India continues to face several structural and systemic challenges. 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.

5.1 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. As a result, the transformative promise of free and compulsory education remains constrained by the inability of the system to translate schooling into genuine educational attainment.

5.2 Implementation Gaps and Infrastructure Deficits

Although the RTE Act prescribes minimum infrastructure standards, significant disparities persist in the availability and quality of school facilities, particularly 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. Limited access to digital devices, unreliable internet connectivity, and lack of digital literacy among teachers and students have restricted the integration of technology into teaching and learning processes. 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. In some cases, teachers are burdened with non-teaching administrative duties, reducing their capacity to focus on classroom engagement and pedagogical innovation. These factors collectively weaken the effectiveness of the RTE framework in delivering quality education.

5.3 Socio-Economic and Regional Disparities

Persistent socio-economic and regional disparities remain a major obstacle to the realization of equitable education under the RTE regime. Children from marginalized communities—including Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, minorities, migrant families, and economically weaker sections—continue to face disproportionate barriers in accessing consistent and quality education. 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.

5.4 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.

6. Policy Integration and Future Directions

The transformative potential of free and compulsory education in India depends not only on legal recognition and expanded access but also on the effective integration of educational policies and forward-

looking reforms. While the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 laid the foundation for universal elementary education, evolving socio-economic realities and learning challenges necessitate policy realignment and innovation. Integrating the objectives of the RTE framework with broader educational reforms, particularly the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, is essential for ensuring sustainable and inclusive educational transformation.

6.1 Alignment with National Education Policy (NEP) 2020

The National Education Policy 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.

6.2 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.

6.3 Focus on Quality and Teacher Capacity Building

Ensuring quality education is central to bridging the gap between access and learning outcomes. Teachers play a pivotal role in this process, making teacher capacity building a critical area for future reform. Investments in pre-service and in-service teacher training must prioritize pedagogical competence, subject

mastery, child psychology, and inclusive teaching practices. 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.

7. Conclusion

The constitutional recognition of free and compulsory education under Article 21A, operationalized through the RTE Act, 2009, represents one of the most significant social policy reforms 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 National Education Policy 2020. Only through sustained structural commitment can free and compulsory education evolve from a constitutional guarantee into a genuine instrument of inclusive and lasting social change in India.

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