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### Quality, Equity, and Scale in the Indian School System: Large-Scale Policy Reforms

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**Abstract:** The Indian school system is the largest in the world, with 1.5 million schools and 9.4 million teachers catering to 260 million students. While reforms since the 1990s have successfully expanded schooling to historically marginalized groups, they have been far less successful in retaining them past the primary level. This paper analyses the conceptions of equity and quality that have informed a raft of policies and state reform efforts in India over the past two decades through the ambitious school curriculum reform efforts of the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (2005), the subsequent framework for Teacher Education (2009), Right to Education Act (2009) (RTE), the integrated scheme for school and teacher education, and the current National

Education Policy (2020). We examine databases on school enrolment, sample-based national assessment surveys, and central teacher eligibility tests to interpret the RTE, using principles of inclusive education in terms of policies, practices, and support structures that enable the presence, participation, and achievement of all students, including from marginalized sections of society. The paper concludes with a reflection on where the country is poised concerning quality, equity, and inclusion in India and the future directions it could take.

**Keywords:** teacher education; educational quality; educational equity; large-scale policy reform; curriculum; school system; India

### **Calidad, equidad y escala en el sistema educativo de la India: Reformas de políticas a gran escala**

**Resumen:** El sistema educativo de la India es el más grande del mundo, con 1.5 millones de escuelas y 9.4 millones de docentes que atienden a 260 millones de estudiantes. Aunque las reformas desde la década de 1990 han logrado ampliar el acceso a la educación para grupos históricamente marginados, han tenido mucho menos éxito en retener a estos estudiantes más allá del nivel primario. Este artículo analiza las concepciones de equidad y calidad que han orientado un conjunto de políticas y esfuerzos estatales de reforma en la India durante las últimas dos décadas, a través de las ambiciosas reformas curriculares del Marco Curricular Nacional para la Educación Escolar (2005), el subsiguiente Marco para la Formación Docente (2009), la Ley del Derecho a la Educación (2009), el esquema integrado para la educación escolar y docente, y la actual Política Nacional de Educación (2020). Examinamos bases de datos sobre matriculación escolar, encuestas nacionales de evaluación por muestreo y pruebas centrales de elegibilidad docente para interpretar la RTE, utilizando principios de educación inclusiva en cuanto a políticas, prácticas y estructuras de apoyo que posibiliten la presencia, participación y logro de todos los estudiantes, incluidos aquellos provenientes de sectores marginados de la sociedad. El artículo concluye con una reflexión sobre la situación del país respecto a la calidad, equidad e inclusión educativa, y las direcciones futuras que podría tomar.

**Palabras clave:** formación docente; calidad educativa; equidad educativa; reforma de políticas a gran escala; currículo; sistema escolar; India

### **Qualidade, equidade e escala no sistema de educação da Índia: Reformas de políticas em larga escala**

**Resumo:** O sistema de educação da Índia é o maior do mundo, com 1,5 milhão de escolas e 9,4 milhões de professores atendendo a 260 milhões de estudantes. Embora as reformas iniciadas nos anos 1990 tenham conseguido expandir o acesso à educação para grupos historicamente marginalizados, elas foram muito menos eficazes em manter esses estudantes na escola após o nível primário. Este artigo analisa as concepções de equidade e qualidade que nortearam um conjunto de políticas e esforços de reforma estadual na Índia nas últimas duas décadas, por meio das ambiciosas reformas curriculares do Marco Curricular Nacional para a Educação Escolar (2005), do subsequente Marco para a Formação de Professores (2009), da Lei do Direito à Educação (2009), do esquema integrado para a educação escolar e formação docente, e da atual Política Nacional de Educação (2020). Examinamos bancos de dados sobre matrículas escolares, pesquisas nacionais amostrais de avaliação e testes centrais de elegibilidade docente para interpretar a RTE, utilizando princípios de educação inclusiva no que diz respeito a políticas, práticas e estruturas de apoio que possibilitem a presença, participação e sucesso de todos os estudantes, inclusive daqueles oriundos de segmentos marginalizados da sociedade. O artigo conclui com uma reflexão sobre a posição atual do país em termos de qualidade, equidade e inclusão, e os possíveis caminhos futuros.

**Palavras-chave:** formação de professores; qualidade da educação; equidade educacional; reforma de políticas em larga escala; currículo; sistema escolar; Índia

## Quality, Equity, and Scale in the Indian School System: Large-scale Policy Reforms

The school education system in India is the largest in the world. Less than a decade after the first national education policy was adopted in independent India in 1968, one of the members of the Commission that was set up to inform the policy wrote that attaining equity, quality, and scale appeared to be an elusive triangle in the Indian education system (Naik, 1979). Equitable provisioning of quality education at scale continues to elude reform efforts in the country. While reforms since the 1990s have successfully expanded schooling to historically marginalized groups, they have been far less successful in retaining them past the primary level (Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2010). Reforms that increased school enrolment have also diluted teachers' professional status and identities by allowing ad-hoc appointments and bringing in narrow, managerial measures to monitor teachers' performance (Batra, 2014; Kumar et al., 2001). The current national education policy document notes that despite numerous policies and state interventions, the issue of inequitable access and learning opportunities for marginalized and historically disadvantaged groups remains (GoI, 2020, p.23). Global studies on education reforms over the last three decades also indicate that large-scale reforms bring in only small pockets of change. As Goodson (1989, p. 94) describes in the context of England, "everywhere the waves created turbulence and activity, but actually, they only engulfed a few small islands; more substantial land masses were hardly affected at all." Sustaining equitable and inclusive change remains a considerable challenge, especially in the context of top-down reform efforts and accountability-driven policy measures (Hargreaves et al., 2014).

In this paper, we address the following research questions:

- What have the conceptions of equity and quality been in India's policies and state reform efforts over the past two decades?
- How has the Right to Education Act (RTE, 2009) of India articulated quality as an enforceable right?
- What is the quality and equity of the Indian education system a decade after the enactment of the RTE Act?

The first section provides the background to the large and complex Indian education system. In the second section we briefly describe the policy landscape and the ambitious school curriculum reforms attempted over the last two decades through, the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCERT, 2005) and the subsequent framework for Teacher Education (NCTE, 2009), the flagship integrated scheme Samagra Shiksha of the Government of India for school and teacher education, the current National Education Policy (GoI, 2020) and the new National Curriculum for School Education (NCERT, 2022,2023). We briefly compare conceptions of the quality of teachers and teaching in the documents of three key international organizations, the World Bank, OECD, and UNESCO, that have influenced policies in India. The World Bank has a direct influence through aid and loans; the OECD is relevant since one of the mandates for a teacher education project in five states funded by the World Bank is to participate in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). UNESCO has traditionally been a catalyst for curriculum and pedagogy reforms in India.

Framed within these understandings of quality, we analyze conceptions of equity, inclusion, and requirements of teachers and teaching as legally enforceable rights and duties in the RTE Act (GoI, 2009). We then discuss trends in students' enrolment in schools and achievement in Grade 8 (when the legal mandate for compulsory education ends) and the number of teacher graduates who clear the central teacher eligibility tests as a proxy for teacher quality over the past decade of the enforcement of the Act. We end the paper with a reflection on the continuities and discontinuities in framing quality and equity in the context of current policy changes.

## Background: Status of the Indian Education System

India inherited a colonial system of education when it gained independence from Britain in 1947. The system was poorly resourced and highly inequitable, with a mere 135,000 schools and less than 30% of students in the age group 6 to 11 attending school (Hingorani, 1955). Currently, India has close to 1.5 million schools, 9.5 million teachers, and 25.5 million students in Grades 1 to 12 (GoI, 2022). Two-thirds of the schools are funded and managed by the state, and 22.5% are private schools. Most schools are in rural areas (82.9%), and 92% are state-run (CETE, 2023).

India has a federal governance system comprising 28 states and eight union territories. The federal structure and the sharing of powers and responsibilities have evolved post-independence. Although education remained a state subject in the early years after independence, states relied on the Centre for funding due to the political-economic structure and a centralized planning and development system. In 1976, education was moved to the Concurrent List through a constitutional amendment, allowing central and state governments to share responsibility for policy formulation. The post-1980s period has been dynamic regarding Centre-state relations in education, influenced by global policy movements such as Education for All (EFA), which shaped the formulation of the National Education Policy (NEP) in 1986. The liberalization of the Indian economy in the early 1990s further opened the gates for private participation in school and teacher education and foreign funding for large-scale education programs. Initiatives such as the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) in the 1990s and the Government of India's flagship Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) in the 2000s were directly funded by the Centre, leading to administrative restructuring and the creation of parallel governance structures within states. These developments have led experts to argue that despite education being a concurrent subject, governance has become increasingly centralized over the past few decades (Mehendale & Mukhopadhyay, 2020).

The academic structure of the school education system is not uniform across the country. However, Grades 1 to 5 broadly constitute the primary school level, Grades 6 to 8 are the upper primary, Grades 9 and 10 are secondary, and Grades 11 and 12 are higher senior secondary. In most states, students should be older than 6 years to be admitted to Grade 1. Opportunities for preschool education are limited and operated by the unregulated private sector in urban areas. However, there is some state effort from the government of India to support 1.36 million childcare centers called *Anganwadis*, which include preschool education (GoI, 2018). The new national education policy, as the first of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, recognizes the need to reconfigure the education system to meet the global policy imperatives of SDG 4, fostering learning to adapt to the rapid changes in the global ecosystem, develop capabilities of learners to prepare them for gainful employment. It proposes revamping the education structure, provides an impetus to early childhood education, and recommends including preschool within formal schooling as part of the foundational stage (GoI, 2020).

The policy also emphasizes ensuring quality education to the historically marginalized, disadvantaged, and underrepresented groups based on, among other aspects, socio-cultural identities

(Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Castes, and Minorities). The Scheduled Castes (SCs), the former ‘untouchables’ in the caste-based social division, and the Scheduled Tribes (STs), the earliest inhabitants of the Indian sub-continent left out of mainstream society, are among the most disadvantaged socio-economic groups in India. They are officially designated groups protected against discrimination under the Indian Constitution and affirmative action in education and employment. They constitute 16.6% and 8.6% of India's total population, respectively, per the last census data (GoI, 2011). Other Backward Castes (OBC) constitute an estimated 52% of the population (GoI, 2018b) and occupy the lower rungs of the caste hierarchy that continues to be a powerful determinant of social, economic, and political privilege and discrimination. SCs, STs, and OBCs are among historically marginalized social categories as opposed to the General Categories (GC) that constitute middle and upper-caste groups. India is multicultural, with 19.3% of the total population of the country reported as Minority communities, which include Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists, Jain, and Zoroastrians (GoI, 2011). Muslims, constituting 14.2% of the population, are the largest minority group and also the most marginalized community, with attainment levels comparable to those of SCs/STs and much lower than those of other religious minority groups. For example, the literacy level among 14 to 15-year-olds as a proportion of the population is 95.7 for the General Categories, 80.0 for SCs and STs, 79.5 for Muslims, and 91.9 for other minorities (GoI, 2006). While the proportion of enrolment of Muslim girls and boys in primary schools has since increased, retention in higher grades remains a problem (GoI, 2022). Equity within India's large and stratified education system has remained the focus of several policies and interventions since independence. Quality at a scale has more recently entered the policy discourse. The following section focuses on conceptions of quality, equity, and scale in policy formulations and reform efforts in the past two decades.

## **Review of Discourses Around Quality, Equity, and Scale**

Equity and inclusion are inherent to definitions of quality in education (Ainscow, 2020; Kumar, 2010; Naik, 1979). Equity relates to providing every child with an equal chance and the necessary support to ensure their success and should be ensured at the system, school, and classroom levels (UNESCO, 2017). Located within the more extensive education system, teacher quality is a dynamic, multi-dimensional, multi-layered, complex construct (Cochran-Smith, 2021). Frameworks for defining teacher quality in high-performing countries center around addressing issues of equity and inclusion and are rooted in ongoing research and inquiry of teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2021; Tattro, 2024) with “mature” education systems moving “away from a focus on specific teacher practices and towards an emphasis on teachers’ capacity as professionals” (Cochran-Smith, 2021, p. 8).

In the Indian context, quality, as an explicit concern in Indian policy texts, emerged first in the 1990s (Sarangapani, 2010). This is not to say that the nature of education provisioning or educational outcomes critical to quality was not mentioned in policy texts before this period. Two important policy documents, viz., the Mudaliar Commission Report of 1953 and the Kothari Commission Report of 1966, comprehensively raise issues critical to educational quality and outcomes, including provisioning for school infrastructure, pedagogic transformation, and problems of an examination-oriented system. Education provisioning and reforms were linked to broader goals of a newly independent democratic polity towards an egalitarian society. Policy articulation of education quality signified a broader imagination of political and social transformation. Quality comes to be defined in minimalistic terms for the very first time in the Programme of Action formulated in 1992 to implement the second National Policy on Education (GoI, 1986/1992) as a

measure of improving government schooling to bring about accountability through the achievement of Minimum Levels of Learning (MLL). The District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), the first external debt-funded education program launched in 1994, mentions quality as an explicit objective to be achieved in its guidelines. Despite several other aspects germane to quality contained in the guidelines, such as curricular and pedagogic reforms and teacher autonomy, the achievement of minimum levels of learning becomes explicitly linked to the idea of quality over the next two decades (Dhankar, 2003; Kumar, 2010; Sarangapani, 2010). DPEP was implemented in 271 districts across 18 states and ushered in an era of mission-mode education policy and program initiatives. The Education for All scheme (*Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*) that followed DPEP was India's response to the global agenda of universalizing primary education, which was implemented throughout the country. It was responsible for expanding and achieving large-scale access by setting up primary schools within a one-kilometer radius. After endorsing the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals in 2015, the scheme was expanded to include secondary education and teacher education under *Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan*, an integrated school education scheme. In the following sub-section, we unpack the discourse to analyze conceptions of quality and equity in attempts to reform the curriculum and pedagogy of school and teacher education through policy directives and state intervention schemes.

### **Conceptions of Quality and Equity in Curriculum and Pedagogic Reforms**

To begin with, we recount specific trends over the last two decades, a crucial period of intense restructuring and reform. Bookending this period are the two National Curricular Frameworks (NCF) 2005 and 2023.

#### ***National Curriculum Frameworks for School Education***

The National Curriculum Framework (2005) drew attention to the role of education in socializing the child for a transformative vision of society. The framers of NCF 2005, which included scholars and practitioners of education in India, sought to address specific issues of "the curriculum load and the tyranny of examinations" (NCERT, 2005, p. 4) through a set of five systemic guiding principles constituting the curricular aims of child centeredness: Connecting knowledge to life outside the school, ensuring that learning is shifted away from rote methods, enriching the curriculum to provide for the overall development of children rather than remain textbook-centric, making examinations more flexible and integrated into classroom life, and nurturing an overriding identity informed by caring concerns within the democratic polity of the country (NCERT, 2005, p.5). The NCF 2005 signaled a paradigmatic and arguably Indigenous shift towards child-centered, constructivist pedagogies (Sarangapani, 2014) to specifically address the burden of incomprehension and the curricular disconnect from the child's life (Khunyakari et al., 2023).

The recent NCF 2022 for the Foundational Stage responds to the so-called learning crisis that became an overarching policy thrust in a post-COVID-19 scenario, with an almost exclusive focus on foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) accompanied by an array of state and non-state interventions designed for the achievement of various competencies and learning outcomes (NCERT, 2022). The impact of this NCF and its counterpart for School Education (NCERT, 2023) will emerge in the future. However, concerns arise if, during implementation, the focus on literacy and numeracy articulated by these curricular documents is equated to the achievement of literacy and numeracy and micro-managed mastery learning curricula (Sarangapani, 2014). This will cause further distancing from attempts towards child-centered curricular and pedagogic reforms over the past two decades, which have been patchily implemented at best (Sriprakash, 2012).

### ***The Right to Education Act***

The Right of Students to Free and Compulsory Act (RTE; GoI, 2009), making education free and compulsory for all students between ages 6 and 14, is historic legislation given the policy attention that elementary education received six decades after the country's Independence and the deep-rooted biases within the administration against the suitability of such a provision in the Indian schooling context (Juneja, 2013). RTE Act 2009 stands out among similar rights-based legislations globally as well. As Juneja (2013) further observes, informal education that had crept into provisioning was firmly set aside by recognizing the duty of governments to provide every child with free education in a formally established school. The discourses around quality and equity in the RTE Act 2009 are elaborated in the findings section of this paper. The legislation explored who is qualified to teach students and how they should be taught. It supported mandates for an initial teacher education program and a teacher eligibility test to qualify for appointment as teachers and institutionalized child-centered pedagogic approaches for children aged 6 to 14.

### ***National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education***

The National Curriculum Framework on Teacher Education (NCFTE) 2009 was framed soon after RTE was written into law. Both RTE and NCFTE built upon the NCF 2005 principle of "nurturing an overriding identity informed by caring concerns within the democratic polity of the country" (NCERT, 2005, p. 5) to design school and teacher education curricula toward the task of providing education of equitable quality to all students. To this effect, NCFTE provided the curricular space and imagination for preparing a professional teaching force that would embody constitutional values and rise to the demands and expectations for providing equitable quality of school education and addressing the pedagogic needs of diverse classrooms. NCFTE echoed NCF 2005 in affirming the role of teachers as transformative agents, noting that the "quality and extent of learner achievement are determined primarily by teacher competence, sensitivity, and teacher motivation" (NCTE, 2010, p. 1).

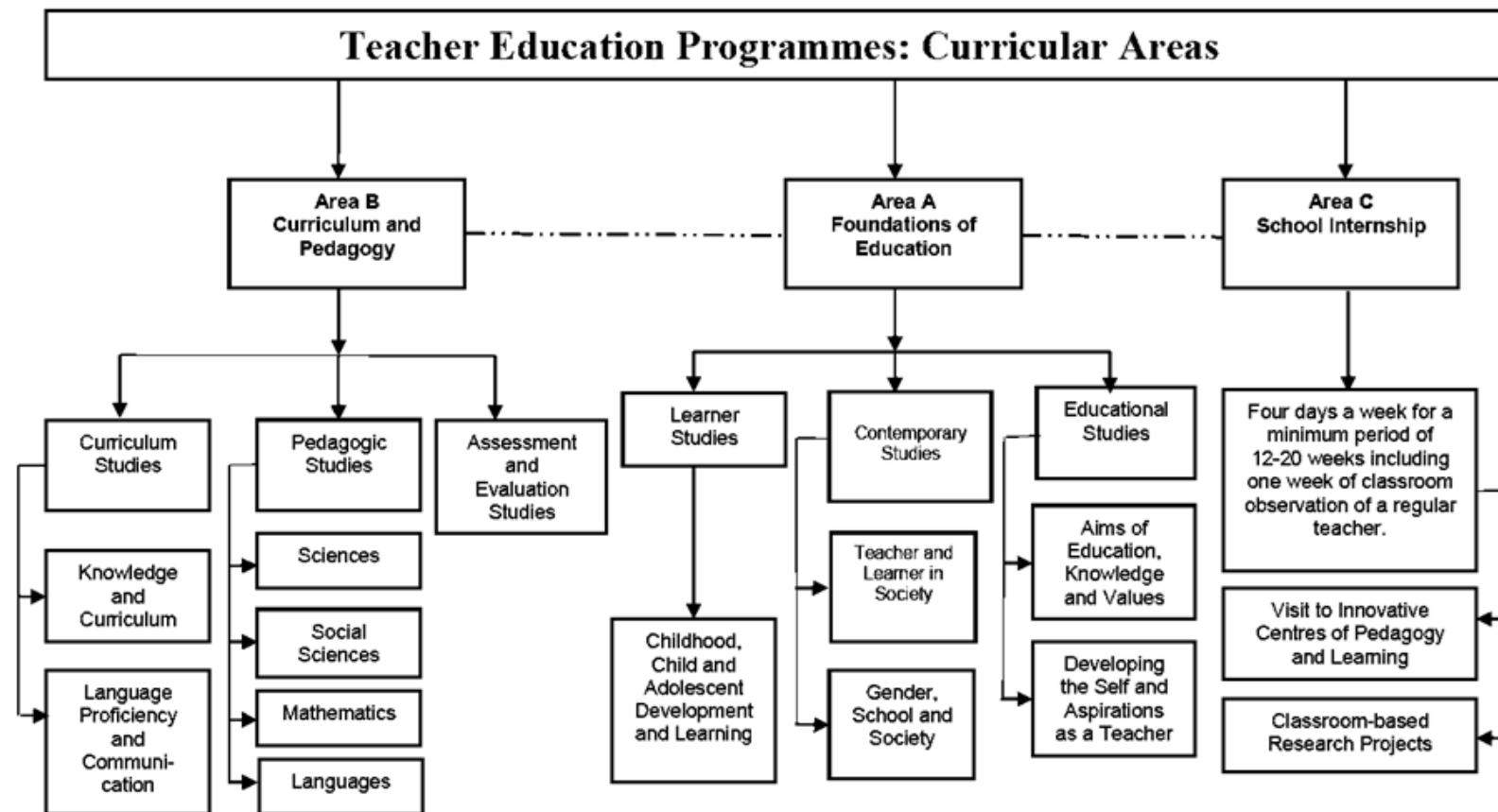
As shown in Figure 1, NCFTE reimagines teacher education curriculum in three broad areas, namely, foundations of education, curriculum and pedagogy, and school internship, drawing upon theoretical and empirical knowledge prompting student teachers to reflect upon their experiential realities and learners' social milieu to generate knowledge and engage in continuous professional learning. Systemic factors such as teachers' status, pay, working conditions, and the length and rigor of their professional preparation are critical to teacher quality. NCFTE's proposals, including increasing the teacher preparation period, are reiterated in the current education policy (GoI, 2020).

### ***National Professional Standards for Teachers***

Despite efforts to reform the curriculum and pedagogy of teacher education to make schooling equitable and inclusive, the divide between the rhetoric of policy and the enforcement of this policy becomes apparent when the latter is focused more on performative standards of teacher accountability rather than the development of a responsive, competent workforce that is duly compensated. The discourse of performativity, bolstered by a regime of standardized testing of school students backed by international funding agencies, has come to govern the teacher education space as well. The recent National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPST) outlines competencies applicable to all teachers (NCTE, 2023), irrespective of their or their students' social or geographic location and school contexts. Implementing such uniform standards for a diverse context remains a question for future inquiry.

**Figure 1**

Teacher Education Programs: Curricular Areas



Source: National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education 2009 (NCTE, 2010, p. 27)

## Global Influences

Structures of school education, social location of students and teachers, and wide variability in provisioning notwithstanding, there has been a perceptible shift from quality and equity of input and processes to achieving specific outcomes. As with policy formulation, part of this shift away from a multi-pronged effort to reform curriculum, pedagogy, and professionalization of the teachers' cadre towards a focus on performativity and accountability via narrow assessment measures has been attributed to the influence of international organizations. The World Bank has a direct influence through aid and loans, beginning with the District Primary Education Project (DPEP) in the 1990s and the present Strengthening Teaching-Learning and Results for States (STARS) program in five states, expected to expand over the next five years. More recently, with India aspiring to participate in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) after a disastrous attempt in 2009, the OECD is relevant as a benchmarking measure of quality. With its more humanistic approach, UNESCO has primarily played the role of norm-setting and consensus-building in India (Singh, 2010).

## Conceptual Framework

Our conceptual framing emerges from the critique of the quality-equity-scale imaginary that has defined education policy discourse in the last four decades in India. The conceptions of quality, equity, and scale emerging from international organizations, as well as Indian policies, enfold an inherent tension between the foundational reimaging of education in a rapidly changing world and narrowly prescribed benchmarks to compare countries through standardized testing. Framed within these complex and contradictory understandings of quality in Indian policies and reform efforts, we focus on the reforms initiated by the RTE Act since it denotes legally enforceable notions of quality. Building on the premise that equity and inclusion are inherent to quality in education, we use the principles of inclusive education as “(a) process that helps to overcome barriers limiting the presence, participation, and achievement of learners” (UNESCO, 2017, p. 7) to analyze the potential impact of the RTE Act. The quality of teachers is essential in supporting inclusive education, for which they need high-quality, research-based professional development (Tatto, 2024).

## Method

To answer our first research question on the conceptions of equity and quality in Indian policies and state reform efforts, we reviewed national policy documents, curriculum frameworks for school and teacher education, and the national professional standards for teachers. The key narratives from these documents were summarized in the section titled 'Review of discourses around quality, equity, and scale.'

The Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act, enacted by the Government of India in 2009 and adopted in all states, helps answer our second question to understand how the Act articulates quality as an enforceable right for all children, in a society marked by inequities. We use document analysis to identify conceptions of quality in the RTE Act 2009 and draw upon its commentaries and critiques. In analyzing the content of this legislation, we were primarily interested in identifying the following: What input parameters are considered essential for quality at scale? What are the systemic, institutional, and teacher-level processes mandated to ensure inclusion and equity for all children aged 6 to 14 years?

To respond to the third research question about the quality and equity of the education system in India in the post-RTE period, we use the principles of inclusive education and the quality of teachers as the twin parameters to identify the trends in terms of one, the potential impact of

RTE Act over the past decade and two, areas of gap. To identify the extent to which the country has overcome barriers limiting learners' presence and achievement, we examine student enrolment and performance databases. As a proxy for teacher quality, we have used the results of teacher eligibility tests. Student enrolment data from 2012 to 2022, obtained from the Unified District Information for Education (UDISE) database maintained by the Ministry of Education, Government of India, is analyzed to identify student enrolment trends. Students' social categories further disaggregate enrolment data for Grades 1, 5, 8, and 10 to ascertain equity in access to schooling. Grades 1-8 include the elementary stage of schooling corresponding with the ages 6-14, that are legally guaranteed free and compulsory education under the RTE. We analyze data from the National Assessment Survey (NAS), large-scale school-based assessments conducted by the National Council for Educational Research and Training, an autonomous organization entirely funded by the Ministry of Education, to identify achievement trends in Grade 8 (when the legal mandate for compulsory education ends). National achievement surveys have been administered every three years since 2001 for classes 3, 5, 8, and 10 across all 36 states and Union Territories (UTs) in the country; in 2017, there was a methodological shift from testing content to competency levels. Therefore, our analysis considers the two most recent ones, NAS 2017 and 2021, due to their relative comparability regarding assessment framework, grades, subject areas tested, and the definition of grade-specific learning outcomes. Lastly, we analyze data on the number of teacher graduates who clear the central teacher eligibility tests as a proxy for teacher quality. The central eligibility tests are conducted by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), an examination-conducting body under the Ministry of Education, Government of India. We use these databases to interpret the impact of the RTE Act 2009 in terms of the extent to which it has enabled the presence and achievement of all students over the past decade of its implementation and where gaps remain.

## **Findings: A Legal Route to Quality Reforms Through the RTE Act 2009**

Beyond access, the RTE Act specifies the quality of schools, curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and teacher qualifications as legally enforceable rights and duties. We briefly describe the quality parameters mandated by the RTE Act. In the following sub-section, we analyze the Act's potential impact on enrolment trends, student performance, and teacher quality.

### **Legal Formulation of Quality in the Right to Education Act**

The RTE Act has equity and inclusion at the core of its formulation and values child agency "to successfully construct learning given the appropriate learning environment and pedagogical support" (Juneja, 2013, p. 220). It specifies school building requirements, including the provision of adequate teaching-learning materials, play, games, and sports equipment, and a library, and the minimum number of instructional hours in an academic year, ranging from 800 for Grades 1 to 5 to 1000 for Grades 6 to 8 (Sections 19 & 25). For comparison, the corresponding range in the OECD countries averages 807 and 923, respectively (OECD, 2021). The student-teacher ratio is specified per school and level. For example, a school with a strength of 151-200 students should have five teachers and a head teacher for Grades 1 to 5 and at least one full-time teacher each for Science and Mathematics, Social Sciences and Language, one head teacher, and part-time teachers for Art Education, Physical and Health Education and Work Experience for Grades 6 to 8. In an attempt towards affirmative action, the Act requires all private schools to reserve at least 25 percent of seats for students from economically weaker sections (Section 12).

An essential dimension of quality, as envisaged by the RTE Act, is child-centered education. This is conceptualized at the system, school, and classroom levels. The Act lays down the duties of the academic authority to provide opportunities, among others, for 'learning through activities,

discovery, and exploration in a child-friendly and child-centered manner' and 'helping the child feel safe, free of fear, trauma, and anxiety and free to express their thoughts' (GoI, 2009). In its original formulation, the RTE Act prohibits detention (section 16) and advocates Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (section 29). The Act also endorsed the national curriculum framework for school education (NCERT, 2005), whose central premise was child-centredness with a constructivist epistemic belief and an expectation that teachers adopt child-centered pedagogies.

The Act goes on to identify the aims of education that the curriculum and assessment must follow. These include conforming to the values enshrined in the Indian Constitution, leading to the all-round development of the child, building up the child's knowledge, potentiality, and talent, developing physical and mental abilities to the fullest extent, learning through activity, discovery, and exploration in a child-friendly and child-centered manner, providing education in mother-tongue as far as practicable, helping the child feel safe, free of fear, trauma, and anxiety and free to express their thoughts (Section 29). It mandates that a teacher will always be a qualified professional, with the qualification determined by the National Council for Teacher Education (Section 23). This section also specifies the terms and conditions of teacher appointment and the duties of teachers related to regularity, punctuality, completion of curriculum, providing additional instruction to students, and interaction with parents are listed along with the processes for addressing grievances (Section 24). It disallows the allocation of non-educational duties to teachers other than for the decennial population census, disaster relief, and elections (Section 27). It prohibits private teaching activities for teachers outside the school (Section 28). Accountability and participatory planning are provided through establishing School Management Committees for government schools (Section 21) and the overall monitoring of the implementation of the Act by Children's Commissions and redressal of grievances by the local authority (Sections 31 & 32).

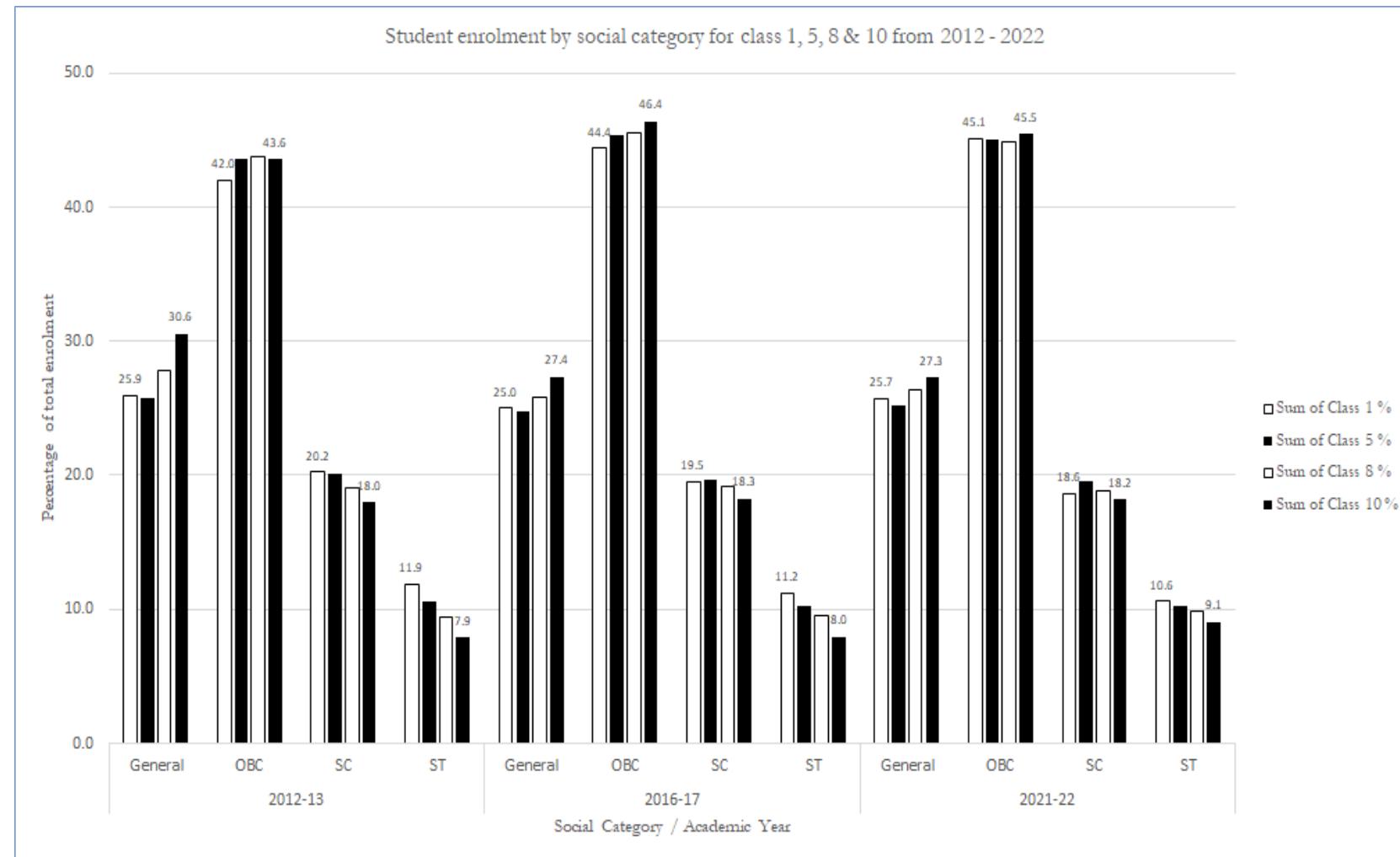
## **Trends in Education Quality**

Even though the conception of quality in the Act is multi-dimensional and its mandates for equitable opportunities for students in the age group of 6 to 14 are multi-pronged, for the analysis of its potential impact over the past decade of enforcement of the Act, we rely on existing data sets to identify trends in terms of school enrolment, students' performance in a standardized test to ascertain respectively presence and achievement, and the number of teacher graduates who clear the central teacher eligibility tests as a proxy to teacher quality indicative of the competence to support participation of all students.

### ***Enrolment in Schools***

States across India have universal enrolments at the entry-level, currently Grade 1 in most state-run schools. However, enrolment drop is nearly 17% overall as students move to Grade 9 (the legal mandate for compulsory education ends in Grade 8). As shown in Figure 2, the share of enrolment in the general category remains steady or even increases from lower to higher classes. There has been a decline in the share of total enrolment among the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) as they move from Grades 5 to 10 over the past 10 years. Figure 2 presents the national average based on aggregated enrolment data by social category across all states in India.

While not shown in the figure, sharp variations exist in enrollment across states and locations. The 75<sup>th</sup> round of National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) data shows that 73.65% of the population had dropped out before completing senior secondary school, i.e., Grade 12. The risk of leaving school is highest for SC and ST, with 80% of them leaving school before completing class 12 (Kumar et al., 2019).

**Figure 2***Trends in Enrolment over the Past Decade*

Source: Compiled from UDISE Data (GoI, 2022, 2017, 2013)

### **Performance in Large-Scale Assessments**

As mentioned in the methods section, we analyze data from NAS 2017, conducted across classes 3, 5, and 8, and NAS 2021, conducted amidst the pandemic across all subjects and grades. We included private schools in our sample for the first time. NAS 2017 (Grades 3, 5, 8) and 2021 (Grades 3, 5, 8, 10) categorize students' performance levels from below basic to basic, proficient, and advanced. The performance level is identified by scaled score using item response theory with a mean of 300 and a standard deviation of 50. Performance is compared across subject and grade levels by gender and social category.

The NAS 2017 data of 2.2 million students from 110,000 schools across all states and UTs shows that a little over 50% of students lie below basic or at the primary level across Grades 3, 5, and 8 in all subjects. Regarding gender equity, girls perform on par or slightly better than boys across all grades and subjects. In terms of social categories, the differences in performance are significant. The performance of students from the SC, ST, and OBC categories was significantly lower than that of the general category. The gap in performance levels increased in higher grades, with the difference increasing in Grade 8 compared to Grade 3.

NAS 2021 data of 3.4 million students from 118,274 schools from all states and UTs indicates that more than 70% of students lie below basic and basic levels across all grades and subjects. The percentage of students falling under "below basic" and "basic" levels increases as they move from Grades 3 to 10. In Grade 3 (language), Grade 5 (mathematics and environmental studies), and Grade 8 (mathematics, science, and social science), more than 60% of students are in "below basic" and "basic" levels. In Grade 10, more than 90% of students fall below basic and basic levels in language and science, with the performance of girls comparable to that of boys across subjects. The performance levels of students belonging to SC, ST, and OBC categories were again significantly low. Among the marginalized groups, OBCs performed better than SCs and STs, and SCs performed better than STs. This finding is across subjects and grades.

As shown in Table 1, across states, the percentage of students from SC and ST categories below or at the basic level is much higher than that of students in the general category. In contrast, the trend is the opposite for proficient and advanced levels.

**Table 1**

*Performance of Grade 8 Students across Four States*

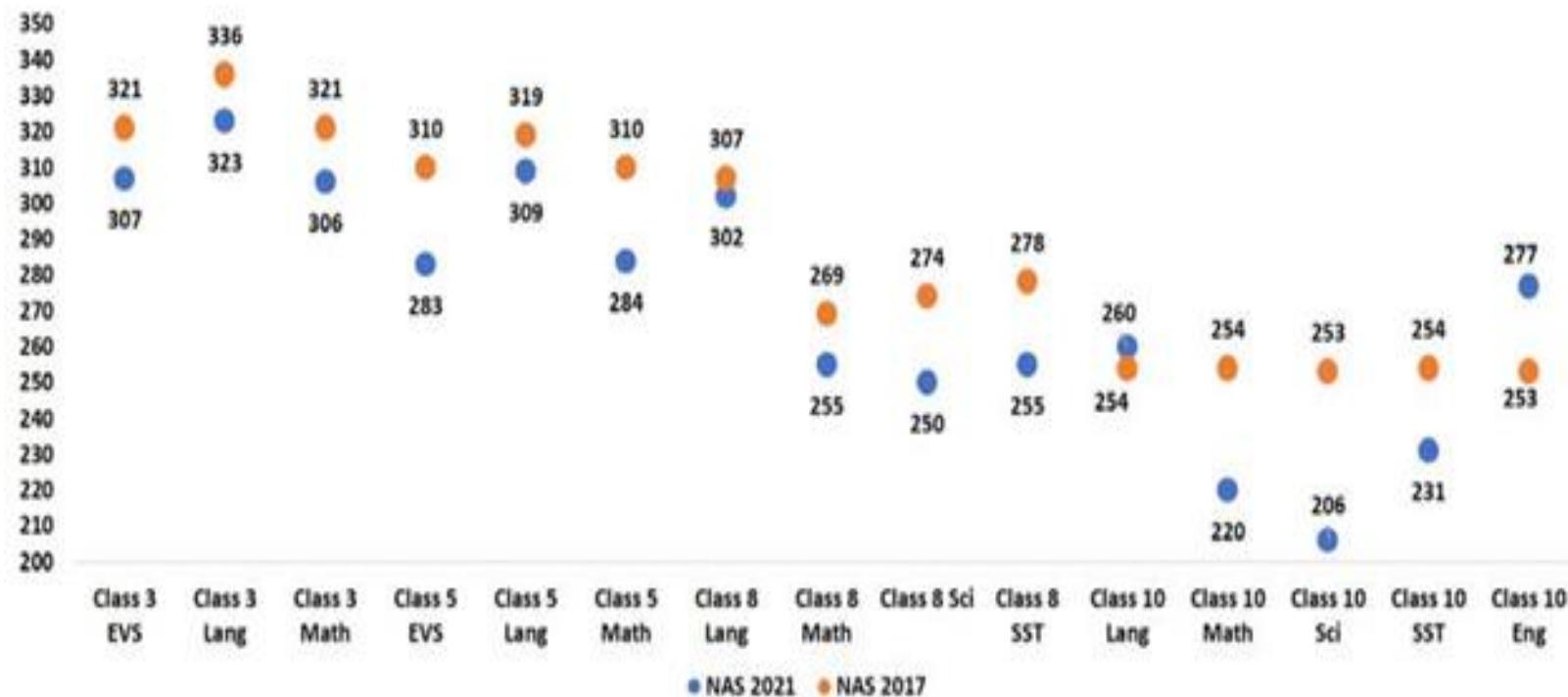
Subject	State	Below Basic and At Basic Level (% of students)				At Proficient and Advanced Level (% of students)			
		SC	ST	OBC	General	SC	ST	OBC	General
Language	Andhra Pradesh	80	89	74	60	20	11	26	40
	Assam	78	79	74	74	22	21	26	26
	Delhi	71	66	59	56	29	34	41	44
	Maharashtra	61	76	60	54	39	24	40	46
	National	72	77	70	54	28	23	30	46
Mathematics	Andhra Pradesh	83	86	78	74	17	14	22	27
	Assam	74	79	78	65	26	21	22	35
	Delhi	86	74	76	74	14	26	24	26
	Maharashtra	82	78	78	76	18	22	22	24
	National	75	78	74	68	25	22	26	32

Source: NAS 2021 Data

As indicated in Figure 3, performance across school subjects and grades is declining, the only exception being Grade 10 scores in Language and English. School closures during COVID-19 emerged as a significant contextual factor negatively impacting student learning, especially for students from marginalized social categories. The national average marks variations across states. By way of an example to indicate regional variations, data for one grade in two subjects, one state each from the South (Andhra Pradesh), East (Assam), North (Delhi), and West (Maharashtra) of India, is given in Table 1.

**Figure 3**

*Comparison of NAS 2021 and NAS 2017*



Source: Compiled from NCERT (2021) & (2017)

### **Teacher Quality**

A fundamental reform brought in by the RTE Act was the introduction of a Teacher Eligibility Test (TET) conducted at the Central (CTET) and state levels as a form of teacher licensing based on a test of their relevant knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values. TET is mandatory for teachers across most states and union territories in India. The quality of teacher education is a critical concern since 92% of pre-service teacher education programs are located in self-financed institutions. Analysis of the TET papers reveal their limited scope and range. Over 50% of the questions test school content knowledge related to regional language, English language, mathematics, science, and social studies. Less than 10% of paper assess other forms of professional knowledge including pedagogical knowledge, and on childhood and child development. Questions on inclusive education, curriculum, assessment and evaluation constitute less than 5% of the test. A majority of the questions test for lower level cognitive skills with 20% of questions testing for abilities to analyze or evaluate (Sarangapani et al., 2021). Nonetheless, scores obtained in the test serve as a proxy to assess the teacher preparation institutions and the quality of teachers based on their demographic profiles. Of the 2 million thirty-seven thousand teachers who took the Central Teacher Eligibility Test conducted in 2024, 24.61% of candidates qualified in Paper 1, which is for primary levels and tests content and pedagogic knowledge related to child development, regional language, English language, mathematics, science, and social studies. Out of 150 marks, teachers from the general category are expected to score 90 (60%), and the passing percentage for teachers from the reserved categories (OBC, SC, and ST) is 55%. Of the teachers appearing in Paper 2, which qualifies them to teach in upper-primary and secondary schools, a mere 8.66% passed. The authors had access to TET data of one state in South India. Analysis of this data showed better performance of candidates from government-funded and managed institutions than self-financed ones. This observation holds across parameters such as mean marks obtained and performance across social categories (CETE, 2023).

We began this section with the conceptions of quality in the RTE Act. These are aligned with humanistic and rights-based ideas (for example, UNESCO-IIEP 2023) in terms of providing every child (in the age group of 6 to 14 years) with an equal chance and necessary support to succeed at the systemic, school, and classroom levels. Inclusion is therefore considered inherent to quality in the legislation. In terms of its impact over the past decade, the data indicates that barriers to students' presence in schools have largely been addressed with universal enrolment in Grade 1. However, retention of all students beyond primary grades continues to elude the system. For girls the barriers to academic achievement seem to have been overcome, but overall quality of performance of students, especially at the secondary school level is poor. Stark inequities remain in retaining students beyond the legally compulsory schooling stage and supporting those from marginalized communities to attain essential learning competencies. One critical component of classroom-level support is teachers' quality. The performance of professionally qualified teachers in the teacher eligibility test indicates much more needs to be done than merely legislating teacher qualifications.

### **Discussion:**

### **The “Triangle” Continues to be “Elusive” in the Indian Education System**

In this section, we retrospectively reflect on how far the Indian education system has come since its independence from colonial rule in 1947. However, the agenda of attaining quality with equity at scale in the world's most extensive education system continues to evade systemic reform efforts. We analyse the current reform efforts initiated by the new education policy (GoI, 2020)

regarding continuities and discontinuities with the conceptions of quality in the RTE. We then explore why teacher quality continues to remain problematic, despite reform efforts and, identify how critical barriers have emerged due to interconnected factors limiting all students' presence, participation, and achievement (UNESCO, 2017). We conclude the paper with a prospective overview of what needs to be done to implement the reforms initiated by the RTE Act in the Indian education system.

The opening statement of the first post-independence national education commission, “(t)he destiny of India is now being shaped in her classrooms” (GoI, 1966, p.1), captured the importance attributed to education by policymakers. The first education policy emphasized larger aims of education and required quality inputs and processes alongside outcomes. Despite the “outstanding” “gains” made post-1947 (when India became independent), scaling quality and equity education for all remained “elusive” in a country straddled with an inequalitarian society, inherited colonial educational structures, and scarce resources (Naik, 1979, p. 42). A decade later, the second national policy on education also noted, “policy formulations .... did not get translated into a detailed implementation strategy, accompanied by the assignment of specific responsibilities and financial and organizational support. Therefore, problems relating to quantity, quality, and equity have reached “massive proportions” (GoI, 1986, p. 3).

While this policy was instrumental in setting up local support structures for teachers, global neo-liberal influences were evident (Velaskar, 2010) in the narrowed conception of quality in the form of “minimum” levels of learning (Kumar, 2010) and in its formulation of an education guarantee scheme, which made allowances for poorly provisioned temporary schools and ad-hoc appointment of teachers without professional qualifications (Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2010). Coming half a century after the first policy, the current national education policy begins with the observation that hitherto, policy implementation in the country has been less on quality of education and more on issues of access and equity and claims to “appropriately” deal with the “unfinished agenda” of NPE 1986/1992 (GoI, 2020, p. 4). It calls for a shift in focus from inputs to outcomes. Scholars have questioned the extensive focus on outcomes without recognizing the underlying socio-historical-political inequities, adequate resource allocation for inputs and processes, and linear definitions of teacher quality and bureaucratic accountability measures. Even as it invokes inclusion and equity, the policy remains inconsistent. It neither builds on the experiences of implementing the RTE Act nor the curriculum reforms initiated for school and teacher education in 2005 and 2009, respectively (Rangarajan et al., 2023; Sharma & Singh, 2023).

The recently announced National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPST) are expected to “inform the design of pre-service teacher education programs and would cover expectations of the role of the teacher at different levels of expertise/rank and the competencies required for that rank” (NCTE 2023, p. 15). Outcomes-based teacher professional standards impact teachers' professional identities as change agents, especially in meeting the needs of students from marginalized sections of society (Hall & McGinty, 2015). Jal Mehta (2013,) notes, "Standards and accountability are weak technology to produce the outcomes policymakers seek. Improving teaching and learning requires the development of skill and expertise; simply increasing expectations (even when accompanied by evidence) does little to bring about results" (p. 7). Performance-driven accountability measures also risk taking away teachers' time from relational roles to those of technicians managing targets (Chandran, 2020; Sarangapani et al., 2018). Teacher standards cannot exist in isolation and need to be located within the more extensive education system, even as research indicates that connections between teacher education, classroom practices, and student performance are not linear, and attempting to capture them through standards can be fraught with problems (Cochran-Smith, 2021; Tatto & Pippin, 2017).

As in other parts of the world, opposing conceptions of quality in education and how to attain equity at scale co-exist within the Indian education system. One set of ideas is based on 'liberal and humanistic' principles and a discourse that seeks child-centered pedagogies and autonomy for teachers with state support to empower them to meet the diverse needs of learners (Batra, 2014; Sarangapani et al., 2018). Based on neo-liberal perspectives and emerging from globalized market forces, the second set favours privatization, focusing on narrowly conceived outcomes without addressing the deep-rooted inequities. This "reified conception of quality" has been attributed to the involvement of bilateral and multilateral agencies in directing state policy and the mission mode of operations (Sarangapani, 2010, p. 42). The Indian schooling system has been impacted by a global policy movement from the 1990s that is "relentlessly shaped by neoliberal ideologies and economic agendas of global capitalism" (Velaskar, 2010, p. 59), leading to increased marketization and commercialization of education (Nambissan, 2012). Here, teachers are considered technicians to be held accountable within an evaluative framework, coupled with a discourse of inefficient public-school teachers (Sarangapani et al., 2018). Given these contradictory forces, while access has substantively increased, making India the most extensive education system in the world, reform efforts to improve quality on the ground have remained resistant to change, barring pockets of excellence. The RTE Act 2009 offered a unique context in India where a broad conception of quality regarding institutions, teachers, curriculum, and pedagogy was legally mandated for all children aged 6 to 14. However, there has subsequently been a conceptual narrowing of the notion of quality from a fundamental engagement with the notion of education, its aims, and objectives alongside comprehensive curricular and pedagogic reforms to a limited focus on access and minimum levels of learning. This instrumental focus on quality emerges as a primary barrier to quality education.

In the first four decades since independence, a benign view of education, particularly primary education intended for disadvantaged sections, was viewed as a harmless activity that allowed a "smokescreen" to be erected to protect such educational initiatives and their agendas from closer, critical inquiry (Kumar et al., 2001). A related set of views peculiar to the Indian context limits education concerns to provisioning for government schools meant for the poor segments, as it is assumed that the middle and upper classes can buy the education they wish (Sarangapani, 2018). For the first time, the RTE Act provided an opportunity to enforce a universal conception of quality as a legally enforceable mandate across all schools. It offered a robust framework for large-scale policy, research, and practice reforms. However, interpretations in the state formulations and subsequent amendments to the RTE Act have hollowed out conceptions of quality in the RTE Act as formulated in 2009. For instance, discourses around child-centered pedagogies (CCP) across non-Western contexts have been heavily debated. CCP and its spread as a progressive cultural value in the Global South has been critiqued for being embedded within a Eurocentric worldview, finding its way through global policy travel, creating a false equivalence between child-centered and learning-centred pedagogies. In the case of India, the CCP emerges as a complex, multi-layered construct that represents ideals and concerns that are unmistakably indigenous but have been influenced by developments in cognitive sciences and Western discourses (Sarangapani, 2023). The issue here is not about the alien nature of CCP but that they are "hollowed out of their intellectual substance" and implemented in over-simplified terms using technologies and teacher-proofed curricula (Sarangapani, 2023, p. 14). Subsequent developments in the implementation of RTE unfortunately confirm this viewpoint. The assessment reforms comprising continuous and comprehensive evaluation and the provision of no detention faced severe resistance from teachers, administrators, and parents alike for reasons ranging from difficulty in administering formative assessments to the fear of being a deterrent to learning and laxity among students. With the recent amendments to the RTE Act, state governments have disbanded these twin components of child-centred education that

were expected to usher in the much-awaited transformation of an exam-oriented system towards child-friendly pedagogies and quality in teaching and learning. Working at cross purposes of different stakeholders at the systemic level has meant the examination system remains unreformed, which is the second critical barrier to achieving equity at scale.

School stratification along socio-economic lines and provisioning by a range of private or government schools have been markers of exclusion since the colonial period. The trends reported in the previous section indicate that considerable gains have been made in school access and enrolment. However, students' performance continues to reflect significant disparities in the equity of learning opportunities. Part of the inequitable levels of achievement has been attributed to the burden of incomprehension and alienation of curriculum and pedagogy despite attempts at systemic curriculum and pedagogy reforms initiated since NCF 2005 (Khunyakari et al., 2023). Concomitant reforms in teacher education through NCFTE 2010 have also not yielded many changes in the past decade. The quality of teachers, as inferred by the number who can pass the central teacher eligibility test, is problematic. Despite policy focuses over the past six decades on improving teacher quality, there has been little financial commitment to initial teacher preparation (Batra, 2014). On the one hand, the state has emphasized in-service teacher education through narrow conceptions of quality and poorly designed programs that are primarily outsourced (Dhankar, 2003). On the other hand, since entry-level professional qualification for teachers is mandated and private players comprise 92% of providers, the initial teacher education sector is heavily regulated to maintain quality (Sarangapani et al., 2021). The inability of the system to invest in robust teacher education, coupled with a restrictive regulatory system, has failed to prepare teachers who could support the ambitious school curriculum reform efforts that were attempted, which is the third critical barrier.

One of the most stringent criticisms of the RTE has been the controversial provision of a 25% reservation to students from socio-economically weaker sections in private schools. This measure has been critiqued as a misguided response to addressing the structural inequities in access to quality schooling in the country, wherein a vast majority of poor students access government schools. At the same time, the affluent and middle classes have favoured private fee-paying schools (Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2010). By allowing for such a movement towards private schooling, the RTE not only weakened government provisioning of quality in school but also reinforced the false binary between private and government schooling regarding the quality of provisioning. It is seen as a dilution of the aspirations of common neighbourhood schools conceived by the committee that formulated the first national education policy (GoI, 1968) and an indication of "the lack of political will to provide public-funded schools of at least equitable quality" (Sadgopal, 2010, p. 42). This lack of political will extends to the budgetary allocation for implementing the RTE Act, which required a significant financial outlay. The recommended allocation of 6% of the GDP for education has never been met, with government spending remaining at a low of 3%. Furthermore, experts have noted that over 70% of expenditure on school education is financed by educational fees (levied as an additional tax), which were initially introduced as a supplement but have now substituted government financing for education (Kundu, 2017). This is another critical barrier.

Independent India has made considerable progress in education by providing access to a large population and sustained curriculum and pedagogic reform initiatives. The RTE Act was a landmark legislation based on extensive consensus on what constitutes quality and equity in education at scale, emerging from home-grown ideas and practices. Equity in access, opportunities for all children to participate meaningfully in learning, and equitable learning achievements remain substantive gaps in implementing the RTE Act. In this paper, we have highlighted four barriers that have contributed to the persistence of these gaps, namely, a narrow and instrumental rendering of quality in the course of implementing the RTE Act; a rigid examination system that continues to be unreformed; a weak teacher education system primarily operated by private players and inure to

multiple reform efforts; and lack of adequate budgetary allocation by the state to support the complex process of ensuring enactment of the RTE Act in a very diverse country ridden with inequities.

## Conclusion

We began with the assumption that equity and inclusion are inherent to notions of quality. Analyses of the RTE Act indicated that though the Act had equity and inclusion at its core of legal formulations of quality, these were subsequently hollowed out in interpreting and implementing them in practice. Learning continues to be a burden for both students and teachers, and equitable learning opportunities are diluted due to an overemphasis on outcomes with no mandate for state accountability and legitimizing a stratified schooling system based on social class divisions.

At this critical juncture, when the implementation plan of the national education policy on education (GoI, 2020) and the new curriculum framework for school education (NCERT, 2023) are being rolled out, it is necessary to reflect on the barriers to inclusion critically. Policy rhetoric must be matched with carefully thought-through, well-resourced, targeted initiatives to implement the RTE Act. It is essential to retain democratic consultation and consensus-building processes to plug the inconsistencies and ambiguity within the Act. State investment alongside flexible mechanisms with autonomy for schools and teacher education institutions to adopt the quality measures mandated in the Act is imperative.

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