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## Abstract

This paper analyzes India's recent enactment of universal primary education. Given the and clientelistic features of Indian democracy, this programmatic policy change presents a puzzle. Drawing on interviews and official documents, I find that committed state elites introduced gradual changes to the education system over three decades. To put their ideas into practice, they used administrative mechanisms, layering small-scale reforms on top of the larger education system. With India's embrace of globalization in the 1990s, officials drew on World Bank resources to implement larger programs in underperforming regions, progressively extending them across the country. These incremental reforms supplied the institutional blueprint for India's universal primary education program in 2000. As policies were introduced from above, civil society mobilized from below, using the judiciary to hold the state liable for implementing primary education. While reforms helped expand bureaucratic authority, they also generated new public demands for state accountability.

**Key words:** India; education; political economy; ideas; institutional change

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## Introduction

This paper analyzes India's recent adoption of universal primary education. Following a history of neglect, the Indian state enacted a series of education reforms in the last few decades. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), the central government's flagship program for universal primary education launched in 2000, led to the impressive growth of school infrastructure and the rate of student enrollment, which surpassed 95%. The Midday Meal Program, introduced nationally in 1995, is now the largest school nutrition program in the world. Although major deficiencies in public service delivery remain, nearly every village today has access to a primary school.<sup>1</sup>

These policy changes are difficult to explain in light of research emphasizing the clientelistic features of India's political system. Politicians in clientelistic systems build support by offering selective, targeted policies, to the neglect of universal programs like primary education (Keefer and Khemani 2004; Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007). In India, clientelism is associated with the politics of caste and religion, which forms the basis for electoral competition (Chandra 2007; Chhibber 2014). India's two national parties, the Congress Party and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), have indistinguishable platforms on education, health and anti-poverty programs (Kohli 2012).

What, then, explains India's adoption of universal primary schooling? What accounts for the spurt of programmatic policies by the central government? The answer to this puzzle, I argue, lies in recognizing how ideas evolve inside the Indian state to generate incremental policy reform. What appeared a sudden burst of policy activity was instead the culmination of incremental reforms introduced by committed state elites over decades. These officials took advantage of successive political openings to advance their reform ideas. Though state governments were reticent to cede authority to central agencies, the political backing of national leaders in the 1980s allowed reformers to experiment with small-scale education programs. They received a boost in the early 1990s, when Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's government opened the education sector to international agencies, particularly the World Bank. Drawing on World Bank assistance, reformers launched initiatives in underperforming districts. They extended these initiatives phases across the country, using administrative levers to bypass the entanglements of state and local politics.

By 1999, primary education reforms were operational in more than half of India's administrative districts. SSA was launched nationwide the following year. SSA adopted elements of prior initiatives and scaled them into a universal primary education program. The primary school expansion did not end with the enactment of SSA. As programs were introduced from above, civil society in the 1990s mobilized

from below, using the judicial system to hold state agencies accountable for implementation. The recognition of a constitutional “right to education” by the Supreme Court galvanized civic pressures even further, leading to the 2009 passage of the Right to Education Act.

The findings for this paper are drawn from interviews and historical documents. I conducted 112 in-depth interviews of active and retired state officials, education experts, international organizations and domestic civic agencies in India, from 2008-2011. Further evidence was gleaned from official documents: the reports of national commissions on education (1882-2010), reports and meetings minutes of education committees convened by the central government, budgets speeches, court judgements and media reports.

My argument departs from those suggesting that India’s liberalization and economic growth of the 1990s led to rapid policy change (Ansell 2010; Bhagwati and Panagariya 2013). Income growth and expanding trade surely helped, but it did not mechanically propel state action. The incremental, uneven, and hitherto incomplete, process of expanding primary education does not map neatly on to India’s economic growth trajectory. A decade before liberalization was underway, state elites had begun putting their reform ideas into practice. Explanations that invoke economic shocks, political breaks and other “critical junctures,” overlook such slow-moving processes, which can yield major policy change (Falleti and Lynch 2009).

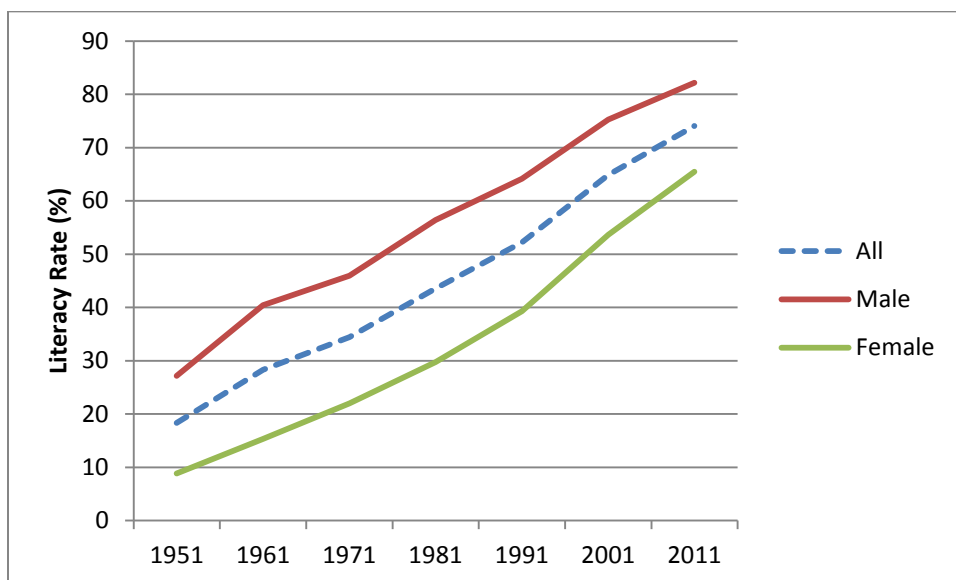
This paper contributes to scholarship on the political economy of reform in India. Studies of India’s liberalization indicate the gradual process of reform, driven in large part by state elites (Kohli 2007; Varshney 2007; Mukherji 2013). In a similar vein, I locate India’s adoption of universal primary education in 2000 to a gradual shift in ideas, caused by reformers inside the state. Committed officials worked beneath the political radar, “layering” new initiatives on top of the school system as they assembled support for larger reforms (Mahoney and Thelen 2010). This argument demonstrates the causal weight of ideas in fostering gradual institutional change (Hall 1993; Blyth 2002; Mahoney and Thelen 2010).

## Creating the Conditions for Reform

To account for policy change, we must first consider the obstacles that India's federal, multi-ethnic democracy posed to the development of primary education policy. The Indian constitution delimited the legislative authority of the central (or union) and state governments over various policy domains. State governments were provided complete legislative authority over education, save for technical and higher education institutions deemed of national importance. Matters were further complicated by India's contentious language politics. Attempts to make Hindi the national language invoked fierce opposition from non-Hindi speaking states. Linguistic conflicts threatened to destabilize the country, and separatist movements were following Partition (King 1998). As a concession to state governments, India adopted the "three language formula," which allowed states to choose the main language of instruction in schools (in addition to Hindi and English).

The normative ideal of free and compulsory primary education was enshrined in Article 45 of the constitution's Directive Principles. The constitutional aspirational carried no legal weight and remained unfulfilled. To advise the central government, national commission on education was convened in 1964. The Kothari Commission recommended that 6% of national income be devoted towards education, which it proclaimed "vital on grounds of social justice and to help the process of transformation of the national economy" (Tilak 2007: 877). However, a limited role for the central government was envisioned based on the idea that state governments needed autonomy to craft policies suited to their sociocultural contexts (Naik 1982:150). Modest public investment—the Indian state spent 0.6% of GDP on education in 1951, which grew to 2% of GDP in 1971—produced lackluster gains in literacy. By 1971, only 34% of the population was literate (see Figure 1). Of the total education budget, 30% went to primary schooling, far below the norm of 50% in other developing countries (Tilak 2007).

Figure 1. India's Literacy Rate, 1951-2011



Source: Census of India, multiple years.

### Centralization of Authority

To create national policies on education policy, the central government had to overcome the institutional and political challenges to its authority from states. Major steps were taken in that direction during Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's reign. Following confrontations with political rivals as well as the judiciary, Gandhi declared a state of National Emergency in 1975. For 21 months, elections were suspended, opposition leaders imprisoned, civil liberties curtailed and the media censored (Frankel 2005: 633-38). Though democracy was later restored, the character of federalism was fundamentally altered, a "critical antecedent" to policy expansion (Slater and Simmons 2010).

Gandhi took decisions away from regional politicians and reinvigorated central agencies like the Planning Commission. A break from earlier practice, she relied on loyal bureaucrats to implement policies rather than the Congress Party organization (Frankel 2005: 642). Central planners intervened directly in the economic affairs of states, and used centrally-sponsored programs and discretionary fiscal transfers to exert indirect influence (Chhibber 1995). Gandhi enacted legislation enlarging the central government's powers (Das Gupta 1978). Far-reaching changes to the constitution

transferred authority from states to India's central government. In particular, the 42<sup>nd</sup> Amendment moved education (along with family planning, forestry, and other policy domains) from the exclusive jurisdiction of state government control to the "concurrent list" of policy subjects, which allowed central and state governments joint jurisdiction. The amendment did not automatically generate new education policies. However, central agencies grew more assertive over state governments, which would later prove critical for education reformers.

### **The 1980s: Forging a National Education Policy**

Agents that lack the political capacity to introduce wholesale institutional change can, Thelen and Mahoney argue, "work within the existing system by adding new rules on top of or alongside old ones" (2010:17). Falleti (2010) demonstrates how such institutional "layering" unfolded in Brazil's health sector. Health reformers infiltrated the bureaucracy to introduce small-scale reforms, which they expanded gradually over decades, culminating in free, universal and decentralized healthcare. India's education reformers pursued similar tactics, albeit in a different institutional environment. Given the administrative weakness of local agencies in India, reformers worked from the top down, introducing changes through central and state-level agencies.

The first political opportunity came after Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi assumed power in 1984. In an authoritative victory, Congress took 48.1% of the national vote and 415 out of 545 seats in Parliament's Lok Sabha (lower house). Gandhi announced in a radio address to the nation that a new education policy would soon be enacted (Biswas and Agrawal 1986: 868). The Ministry of Education was renamed the Ministry of Human Resource Development (HRD), signaling the agency's national importance for development.

The HRD Ministry took charge of drafting what became the 1986 National Policy on Education (NPE). Along with other officials, Union Secretary of Education, Anand Sarup conducted a six-month policy review, inviting input from academics, bureaucrats, elected representatives, civil society, and other stakeholders. The findings were released in a document, entitled *Challenge of Education: A Policy Perspective* (Ministry of Education 1985). Candid in its critique of past failures, the document provoked a national debate on education. Other central agencies were engaged, including the National Council for Education Research and Training (NCERT), which provided technical input and held conferences to solicit policy proposals. All in all, 23



task forces were organized to review proposals (Little 2010). “A major decision which emerged from these discussions,” Sarup reflected, “was that, as a follow up of policy formulation, a separate Action Plan for Policy Implementation would be prepared.” (Sarup 1986:130). From an administrative lens, the focus on implementation was essential given that state governments would have to administer the policy.

The prime minister and HRD Ministry officials had differing views of what to prioritize in the 1986 NPE. Gandhi envisioned a top-tier school system in rural India, modeled after elite boarding schools.<sup>2</sup> The Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya program realized that vision. It established a network of tuition-free residential secondary schools (grades 6-12) for gifted children in rural districts. Some HRD Ministry officials feared that the Navodaya program would mostly benefit rural elites and reproduce inequalities in the education system (Deva 1985). The program’s 453 residential schools threatened to divert scarce resources away from the mainstream school system, which was in disrepair.<sup>3</sup>

Bureaucrats committed to broader school reforms had their own ideas. J.P. Naik, an educationist who served as Member-Secretary of the Kothari Commission, believed that the school system had to adapt to the economic realities of the poor. The traditional school system, in Naik’s (1975) words, “offer[ed] neither help nor a second chance to those unfortunate children who miss its narrow doors of admission or who are compelled to step off it for social and economic reasons.” Anil Bordia, a senior IAS officer and advocate of education reform, believed in the promise of non-formal education. Bordia’s prior experience in the Labour Ministry informed his view that a flexible approach was necessary to integrate poor children into the school system.<sup>4</sup>

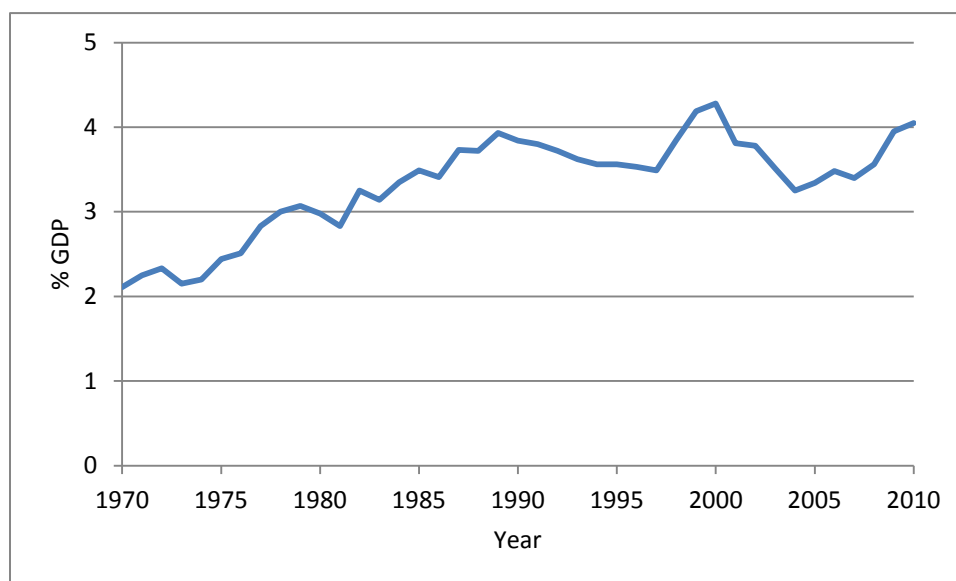
## **Central Missions and Subnational Programs**

To put their ideas into practice, reformers installed new programs on top of existing education policies. The first initiative was Operation Blackboard, a centrally-sponsored program enacted in 1987. Operation Blackboard provided supplementary assistance to states, ensuring that every primary school had at least two classrooms, two school teachers and instructional materials. In addition, a “non-formal” schooling program was created for working children. It offered an alternative curriculum and flexible school timings. While the central government financed these programs, administration rested with states, producing varied results across the country (Chin 2005). To drive implementation forward, HRD officials drafted a 200-page Program of

Action detailing procedures and responsibilities and held frequent review meetings with state governments.

To motivate state governments, reformers also launched projects in a “mission” mode. Unlike standard policies, national missions had well-defined objectives and timelines. Missions were overseen by senior officers in the Indian Administrative Services (IAS), India’s elite civil service. For example, the HRD Ministry introduced a program for adult literacy in 1987, known as the National Literacy Mission (NLM). Corresponding state-level mission bodies were created under the education departments. In some states, NLM mobilized local civic associations to help the state run adult literacy camps. These grassroots reform models were highlighted by the HRD Ministry and shared with other state governments (Bordia and Kaul 1992; Avik 1997). Public spending on primary education grew substantially in the 1980s (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2.** Public Expenditure on Education, 1970-2010



*Source:* Analysis of Budgeted Expenditure on Education, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India (various years).

Along with national missions, reformers also introduced subnational initiatives. In 1984, the Andhra Pradesh Primary Education Program was launched with funding from the UK Overseas Development Agency. Based on innovative teaching methods, it

began as a pilot project in 328 primary schools and was gradually extended to 50,000 schools (Lacey, Cooper et al. 1993). The Shiksha Karmi Project was launched in 1987 in the state of Rajasthan. The program was initiated by Anil Bordia, who served as Education Secretary for Rajasthan at the time. With assistance from the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), the program hired local village youth as para-teachers, a policy later adopted by other states. The Mahila Samakhya Program, which aimed to empower women and girls, was launched by the HRD Ministry with Dutch support in 1988-90 in three states—Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and Karnataka.

For each of these initiatives, senior bureaucrats maintained delicate relationships between New Delhi, state governments and non-state partners. They worked beneath the political radar to manage collaborations with external agencies. In the 1980s, international organizations encountered stiff barriers to working in India. As a World Bank official reflected, *“At the time of the [1986] new policy on education, there was big political resistance to external funding. Outside agencies were seen as a threat.”*<sup>5</sup> Externally-funded initiatives like Shiksha Karmi were thus introduced as *“low key”* projects, which supplemented the mainstream school system (Ramachandran and Sethi 2001).

Committed state officials also cultivated ties with civil society groups, which aided in the implementation of programs. The Mahila Samakhya Program, for example, enlisted the help of village women’s associations to educate girls from disadvantaged communities (Ramachandran and Jandhyala 2014). Committed officials extended bureaucratic support to civic agencies as well. A social activist that worked closely with the Mahila Samakhya program explained,

*Networking with senior [government] officials was critical for us. We located a few people who believed in our cause and kept seeking their support. They put up a strong resistance on our behalf.*<sup>6</sup>

It bears emphasizing that the officials advocating for these programs were outside of the mainstream. The primary education sector commanded little prestige within the state. Compared to finance, power and public works, departments that brought resources and influence, education was considered peripheral. Social services such as health and education were perceived as *“low-status portfolios,”* an unattractive career path for IAS officers aspiring to the highest ranks.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps for that reason, social programs often attracted highly committed officials. For example, Anita Kaul, who led the NLM during its first two years, spent more than 25 years of her career in the IAS working in social sector programs, including education, nutrition and women and child

development. As they began demonstrating visible results—the enrollment rate rose to 79% in 1991—reformers gained political support for their ideas (see Table 1).

Table 1. Gross Enrollment Ratio (Grades 1-8), 1951-2011

Year	Boys	Girls	Total
1951	46.4	17.7	32.1
1961	65.2	30.9	48.7
1971	75.5	44.4	61.9
1981	82.2	52.1	67.5
1991	90.3	65.9	78.6
2001	90.3	72.4	81.6
2011	104.5	103.3	103.9

*Source:* Ministry of Human Resource Development

### **The 1990s: Policy Expansion under Globalization**

With reform ideas firmly in place by the 1980s, India’s embrace of globalization in the 1990s accelerated the process of policy change. Under Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao and Dr. Manmohan Singh, erstwhile Finance Minister, India enacted a far-reaching program of economic liberalization. The Indian government agreed to an economic stabilization package from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The government also reversed its earlier stance towards foreign aid in 1991, officially recognizing the role of international agencies in education and set official guidelines for external projects.<sup>8</sup> The World Bank’s entry into the education sector gave education reformers the opportunity to work on a much larger scale. They had the support of reform-minded political leadership as well.

### **Political Leadership**

In July 1991, one month after becoming prime minister, Rao appointed a committee to review the 1986 NPE. Acharya Ramamurti, a Gandhian social activist and professor, oversaw the committee recommending the expansion Operation Blackboard and the Navodaya school program (Ramamurti Committee 1990). A revised policy was enacted in 1992. Though the revisions were minor, Rao showed his commitment to

primary education, a critical signal to reformers. Given India's tight fiscal conditions, the expansion of primary schooling meant that fewer resources were available for higher education. Furthermore, school teachers, who were state government employees, resisted any interference by the central government in the terms of their service.<sup>9</sup> An official involved in drafting the modified policy explained:

*Rao brought together the key actors from different states to New Delhi. He worked out the political details and handled the opposition. The higher education lobby was not so happy. Then there were issues related to the autonomy of school teachers. Various bureaucratic agencies were having turf battles as well. Ultimately, the political buy-in came from Rao and his coterie of experts.<sup>10</sup>*

Rao's leadership was remarkable given the adverse political conditions at the time. The Congress Party had a minority (220 out of 524 seats) in the Lok Sabha and thus needed coalition partners to maintain power. Social instability was brewing due to Hindu-Muslim conflict after Hindu nationalists proposed tearing down the Babri mosque in the town of Ayodhya. Double-digit inflation ensued after a balance of payments crisis. Economic and religious tensions were salient political issues for voters (Varshney 2007: 251). Primary education, meanwhile, was not high on the political agenda.

Whatever may have motivated Rao, his leadership helped create the political conditions for policy change.<sup>11</sup> It bears mentioning that Rao's interest in education was not a product of India's growing economy in the 1990s, but had evolved over three decades.<sup>12</sup> He had spearheaded education programs in his home state of Andhra Pradesh, first as Education Minister (1968-71) and later as Chief Minister (1971-73). A scholar in his own right, Rao chaired the Telugu Academy (1968-74) and helped make Telugu the language of school instruction Andhra Pradesh. As India's HRD Minister (1985-88), Rao helped advance the 1986 NPE by coordinating efforts across central agencies, like the Planning Commission and the National Development Council (NDC).<sup>13</sup> Rao supported other welfare programs as well, suggesting a deeper interest in the social sector (Manor 2011).

## **The "Education for All" Movement**

Beyond political support from the prime minister, reform-minded bureaucrats harnessed a wave of global activism around child rights. UNESCO declared 1990 International Literacy Year. The World Conference on Education for All was held in

Jomtien, Thailand that same year. Convened by UNESCO, the conference attracted from 155 national governments, 20 inter-governmental bodies and 150 NGOs (Sadgopal 2006). Officials from India's HRD Ministry attended the conference, exchanging ideas with development experts, educationists and civic agencies. India joined other countries in signing on to the "Education for All" goals for 2000.

International agencies at Jomtien were eager to work in India. After much political resistance, they finally found collaborators within the Indian state. An official from UNICEF recounted: "*When the meeting happened in Jomtien, we committed ourselves to Education for All. New, innovative programs sprouted up across the country.*"<sup>14</sup> On the eve of the conference, UNICEF proposed a program in the state of Bihar. The Bihar Education Project was launched later that year in underperforming districts. In 1992, the state government of Rajasthan initiated the Lok Jumbish Project with support from SIDA. As a follow-up to Jomtien, the HRD Ministry hosted a conference in New Delhi under the auspices of UNESCO. The 1993 Education for All Summit brought together representatives from the "E-9," nine high-population countries confronting similar challenges in education.<sup>15</sup> The Delhi Declaration and Framework for Action created the E-9 Initiative, a forum to share best practices.

## **The World Bank**

The greatest support for primary education came from the World Bank, which expanded its collaborations with the Indian government. Education funding was part of the World Bank's "social safety net," designed to offset the adverse effects of fiscal tightening brought on by structural adjustment (Kumar, Priyam et al. 2001). The District Primary Education Program (DPEP) was the World Bank's major initiative in India and the predecessor to SSA. It aimed to improve school access in underserved regions and strengthen the administrative capacity of local agencies. Planning and implementation were devolved to district-level team. A computerized information system was set up to monitor progress in implementation.

To administer DPEP and other central programs, the National Elementary Education Mission (NEEM) was established under the HRD Ministry in 1995. Citing the persistence of "severe gender, regional and caste disparities in provision of elementary education," a central government committee called for NEEM to be "vested with full executive and financial powers" to advance primary education.<sup>16</sup> Although it was a "national" program, central agencies first introduced DPEP in select pockets of

the country. DPEP began with pilot program in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The Uttar Pradesh Basic Education Project began in 1993 in 10 districts with the low rates of female school enrollment. The Bihar project was initiated by UNICEF in 1990 and later taken over by the World Bank. A larger program was launched in 42 districts across the country in 1994, which later expanded to 117 districts in 1997. By 2000, DPEP was implemented in 240 districts across 16 states. It covered 40% of India's territory, making it the largest primary education program in the country till date.

India's growing collaboration with the World Bank and other international agencies helped raise the status of officials in the primary education sector. Bureaucrats who had worked quietly to pursue subnational reforms gained visibility in New Delhi. Their field expertise was essential for India to negotiate the terms of external aid and administer DPEP. A senior official from the education bureaucracy explained:

*Primary education was never considered something we should talk about. It gained visibility within the government only when good IAS officers came to lead DPEP. They had status within the administration and could exert-top-down pressure. With these officers in charge, the political will behind the program became apparent to everyone.<sup>17</sup>*

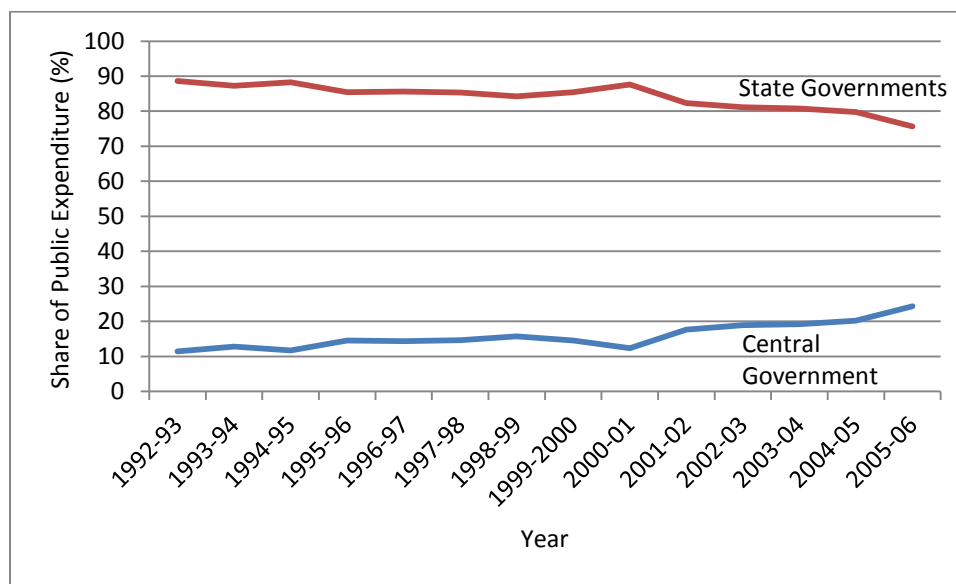
The World Bank's evaluation of DPEP also found that "very competent officials" were placed in charge of the program. The level of state commitment in India had "far exceed[ed] the levels usually seen in other low-income countries." (Abadzi 2002: 5). The prestige associated with primary education also increased, attracting more committed officials.<sup>18</sup>

The World Bank's support for primary education was crucial in that it gave committed officials a platform to implement their own ideas. As close observers noted, what set DPEP apart from similar programs in other countries was the "marked Indianisation of the planning process" (Kumar, Priyam et al. 2001: 563). The design and content of DPEP was based on the experiences of earlier programs and had less to do with the preferences of Bank officials (Colclough and De 2010). In addition, HRD Ministry officials used the administrative apparatus of DPEP to scale up home-grown programs as well. For example, in 1995 the Rao government enacted the National Program of Nutritional Support to Primary Education, popularly known as the Midday Meal Program. Pioneered in the state of Tamil Nadu in the 1980s, the program provided a free meal to children each day in school (Swaminathan, Jeyaranjan et al.

2004). To expand the Midday Meal Program nationwide, the HRD Ministry first introduced it in DPEP districts and gradually extended it across the country.

With an expanding portfolio of programs, the central government assumed greater fiscal responsibility for primary education. Historically, state governments covered the bulk of education spending, with less than 5% paid directly by the central government (Tilak 1989). As Figure 3 shows, the central government share increased to 15% in the 1990s and beyond 25% in 2006. These funds supported the Midday Meal Program, Operation Blackboard, and other centrally-sponsored schemes. These expanding programs helped improve access to schooling, especially for girls (see Table 2). However, the stark inadequacies of India’s primary education system also gained public attention. In 2000, India accounted for a quarter of the world’s 104 million out-of-school children (UNESCO 2002). The widely-cited Public Report on Basic Education (PROBE) found that only a quarter of primary schools had two or more school teachers, two all-weather classrooms and instructional materials (PROBE 1999). At the World Education Forum held in Dakar, Senegal in 2000, India committed itself to the U.N. Millennium Development Goals for education.

Figure 3. Central and State Government Share of Total Public Expenditure on Education



*Source* : Analysis of Budgeted Expenditure on Education, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India (various years).



Table 2. India's Progress in Primary Education in the 1990s

	1992-3		1998-9	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
<i>School Attendance age 6-14 (%)</i>				
Rural	52	72	70	81
Urban	79	85	86	89
Combined	59	75.5	74	83
<i>Proportion of persons aged 15-19 who have completed (%)</i>				
Grade 5	51	73	61	77
Grade 8	36	54	43	56

*Source:* National Family Health Survey I (1992-3) and II (1998-9).

### Scaling up Reform in the 2000's

India's primary education policy in the 2000's built on the progress of the prior two decades. After a BJP-led coalition government came to power, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee continued the education programs initiated by Rao's government. In October 1998, the HRD Ministry convened a State Education Ministers' Conference and announced the commitment of states to expand primary education. SSA was enacted in 2001 with political support across party lines. After Congress returned to power in 2004, it introduced an Education Cess of 2% on taxes collected by the central government, which helped pay for central government programs.

SSA's principal objective was free and universal primary schooling. The program was designed to provide a primary school, along with trained teachers and other amenities, within a 1 km distance of every village. SSA also offered incentives, such as free textbooks, uniforms, schoolbags and scholarships conditional on enrollment. A comprehensive program for pre- and in-service training for school teachers was developed. District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs) were established for teacher training and academic support. The central government assumed 85% of the program's cost and states covered the remainder.

Critically, the design of SSA was based on the experience of previous national programs. A national SSA Mission was created under the HRD Ministry, with corresponding missions created in each state. Modeled on the administrative structure of DPEP, local planning was conducted by district-level teams, overseen by a centralized monitoring system. Having learned from prior reforms, the officials in charge of SSA worked to keep the program “*insulated from political demands.*”<sup>19</sup> The program sought to prevent capture by local elites, particularly village upper castes, who often influenced the placement of schools (Govinda and Diwan 2002). Technocratic rules and procedures were created for the provision of schools and other inputs.

School expansion under SSA occurred at a breathtaking pace. Within a decade, approximately 250,000 new schools and 1.3 million additional classrooms were built. Drinking water facilities were provided in 210,000 schools, and toilet facilities in 420,000 schools.<sup>20</sup> The program’s greatest impact was on enrollment. In the target age group of 6-14 years, enrollment climbed from 160 million in 2002 to 193 million in 2011, and the number of unenrolled children fell from 32 million to 8 million. Dedicated state-level missions and district teams for planning and implementation brought disadvantaged communities into the school system. In the state of Gujarat, for example, Sinha (2010) observed that SSA enrolled 75,847 girls that were previously out of school in 2003, and another 307,280 in 2006.

### **The Limits of Incremental Reform**

India’s adoption of universal primary education was not unequivocally positive. Under the constraints of a clientelistic political system, reformers pursued visible improvements like the construction of school buildings, to the neglect of service delivery.<sup>21</sup> The layering of multiple programs made it difficult to set clear lines of accountability. SSA missions concentrated on infrastructure and enrollment, while state governments oversaw the management of school teachers. These functions operated in parallel, undermining coordination and monitoring of services. The use of administrative mechanisms to pressure state governments also proved its limits. The SSA Mission in New Delhi could go only so far by adding rules and resources from above. In one official’s words, “*Universal access has been achieved. The problem now is the retention of students and quality of education.*”<sup>22</sup> Deeper reforms to address quality required political initiative from state governments.

Among the most serious political challenge to quality reform was posed by government school teachers. As the HRD Ministry introduced new programs, school teachers organized politically to protect their local interests. They were embedded in systems of patronage to influence postings and other administrative decisions (Béteille 2015). Their representation through state legislatures and unions gave them disproportionate influence over the school system (Kingdon and Muzammil 2003). Problems of teacher absence and poor quality teaching were left unaddressed . Along with fast-growing pay scales, teacher demands consumed scarce administrative time and resources, crowding out the concerns of less powerful stakeholders, such as parents and school children.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, one cannot overlook the impact of policy change on the education bureaucracy itself. Over the course of primary school expansion, state officials gained immense power and resources. The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendments to the constitution transferred authority over public services to elected village and municipal councils. In line with this *de jure* decentralization, SSA brought planning functions down to local district and established Village Education Committees (VECs) to manage schools. However, *de facto* control over school funding and management was retained by state bureaucracies, which were reticent to cede control to local communities.

### **Policy Feedback: The Right to Education**

State elites drove the adoption of universal primary education, but the reform process did not end with state action. Over time, India's civil society and judiciary mobilized to hold the state accountable for implementation, cementing policy change into law. The adoption of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act in 2009 offers an instructive case in point. Known as the Right to Education (RTE) Act, this landmark legislation assigns a justiciable duty on the state to provide free and compulsory education for all children (ages 6-14). This latest, and still ongoing, phase of primary education reform suggests that policies, over time, can generate new political expectations and demands on the state (Pierson 1993).

Civil society has a rich history of engagement in social service delivery in India. NGOs have long supported the implementation of state programs, at times blurring the boundaries between civil society and the state (Jenkins 2010). In some states, women's associations were critical in monitoring service delivery, albeit with vary degrees of success (Mangla 2015). As India enacted new social welfare policies, in areas such as

education, housing and employment, civic organizations in the 1990s adopted a more activist stance, invoking the constitutional framework of rights to hold state agencies accountable for implementation (Harriss 2007; Jayal 2013). The judiciary too became aggressive in pursuing cases brought against the state through Public Interest Litigation (Gauri 2009).

Civic and judicial action spurred public debate over the constitutional status of education. Article 45 of the constitution's Directive Principles expressed the state's duty to provide basic education, though it was not legally enforceable. The Supreme Court reconsidered education's status in the 1989 case of *Mohini Jain v. State of Karnataka*. In its decision, the court stated that Article 21 of the constitution, which mentions the right to life and personal liberty, implied other rights as well, including education. Later, in the judgement of *Unni Krishnan v. the State of Andhra Pradesh*, the Supreme Court declared in 1993 that all children have "a fundamental right to free education up to the age of 14 years" (1993:62). In its judgement, the court decried the state's historic neglect of its constitutional duty to educate the masses.<sup>24</sup>

Judicial rulings galvanized civil society to press for new legislation. The National Alliance for the Fundamental Right to Quality Education and Equity (NAFRE), consisting of 2,400 grassroots organizations from 15 states, demanded the central government enact a law recognizing the constitutional right to education. NAFRE members organized petitions, rallies, candle light vigils and hunger strikes outside of Parliament.<sup>25</sup> They were joined by academicians, NGOs such as Child Relief and You (CRY) and Save the Children, along with agencies like UNICEF. Responding to civic and judicial pressures, Parliament adopted the 86th Constitutional Amendment Act in December 2002, placing a legal duty on the state to provide free and compulsory education.

To put the amendment into effect, the HRD Ministry organized committees to develop new legislation (CABE 2005). Drafting the RTE bill involved "several rounds of consultation" between ministry officials, educationists, NGOs, teachers' unions, and other civic bodies.<sup>26</sup> The bill that went before Parliament called for universal school enrollment and completion for grades 1-5. It set national standards for school infrastructure, teachers and curriculum. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's cabinet approved the RTE bill in July of 2009, and it passed swiftly in both houses of Parliament.<sup>27</sup>

With passage of the RTE Act, policy discussions have shifted from school expansion to thornier questions of school quality. To monitor the act's implementation, the National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) was given a lead role. Established under the Ministry of Women and Child Development in 2007, NCPCR's mandate is to ensure that public policy accords with the rights of children, as expressed in the constitution and the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child. The commission, which includes bureaucrats, academics and social activists with extensive experience in the domain of child rights, has worked closely with civic agencies to investigate violations of the RTE Act. Beyond legal action, education NGOs, such as Pratham and Azim Premji Foundation, have partnered with state governments to supplement teacher training and improve learning outcomes. The focus on education quality signals a new phase in the development of India's primary school system.

### **Alternative Explanations**

I have argued that committed state elites led India's gradual adoption of universal primary education. These efforts were initiated in the 1980s and then accelerated in the 1990s as India globalized. State initiative was reinforced by an active civil society and judiciary. To sustain the argument, we must consider other plausible explanations for policy change. Below, I consider alternative explanations based on: (1) economic growth, (2) mass politics and (3) political culture.

#### **Economic Growth**

Conventional wisdom suggests that mass education develops as an economy modernizes and develops (Lipset 1959). Bhagwati and Panagariya (2013) claim that rapid growth following liberalization in the 1990s was the chief catalyst for policy change as it generated revenues for the state to invest in primary education. Likewise, Ansell (2010) contends that India's integration into the global economy in the 1990s raised the demand for skills, which prompted the state to expand primary education. To be sure, a growing economy helped in many ways. India's fiscal position improved considerably after liberalization and the demand for education among the poor has risen (PROBE 1999; Drèze and Kingdon 2001).

Yet, growth cannot explain India's adoption of universal primary education, especially the timing and sequencing of reforms. Public spending on education was on

the rise throughout the 1980s, before liberalization began in earnest. Since then, public spending has not moved in consonance with the country's vastly improved economic conditions. As Figure 2 shows, education spending peaked at 3.9% of GDP in 1989 and then *declined* steadily to 3.5% in 1997, recovering to 4.2% in 1999. It fell further during the next decade, to 3.3% in 2005, before reverting back to 4% in 2009. These irregular spending patterns are puzzling when considering that India's economy grew at 7-8% per annum since 2000, among the fastest growth rates in the world.<sup>28</sup> Nor can growth explain the timing and sequence of reforms, which first targeted poor regions (with external funding), before expanding to the rest of the country.

Demand for education is high among the poor. However, the claim that policy change emerged in response to such demand is difficult to sustain. Services like primary education have not featured highly in electoral campaigns (Ahuja and Chhibber 2012). Clientelism, Thachil explains, "has limited the influence of demand-side constituencies interested in greater public spending on education" (2009:489). Nor was primary education a priority for Indian business elites, who otherwise lobbied effectively for their favored policies (Kohli 2012). The demand for quality education has far outpaced public provision, evidenced by the proliferation of private schools catering to the poor (Kingdon 2007; Muralidharan and Kremer 2007). The woeful learning outcomes in government primary schools casts doubt on the assertion that skill demands of the economy drove policymakers to pursue reforms (ASER 2015).

More generally, whether governments invest in education in ways that are optimal for their economies is an open question. Comparative evidence suggests that public investment in basic literacy has often *preceded* economic growth (Drèze and Sen 2002; Kosack 2012). Studies of the "East Asian Miracle" underscore the role of mass education, which enabled these economies to expand rapidly once they globalized (Stiglitz 1996). More research is necessary to unpack the causes and consequences of mass education for the economy. As some have noted, a deeper understanding the politics through which education demand gets channeled into public policy, in clientelistic settings and elsewhere, is sorely needed as well (Gift and Wibbels 2014).

## **Mass Politics**

A second explanation centers on mass mobilization. In his analysis of India's economic liberalization, Varshney (2007) makes a helpful distinction between the elite politics inside public institutions and mass politics, which is waged in the streets. He

suggests that India's trade and foreign investment policies were an elite concern, distant from ordinary citizens, who mobilized around ethnic disputes. Unlike the rules governing trade, social policies are visible to citizens, which creates the potential for a mass politics of education. Furthermore, India's social movements challenging caste hierarchies may have helped drive policy change (Frankel, Hasan et al. 2002).<sup>29</sup>

Studies of social development in India's southern coastal states demonstrate that mass politics was crucial for that region. Drawing on a pre-independence legacy of social movements, political parties in Tamil Nadu and Kerala organized lower castes to demand progressive social policies (Heller 1999; Singh 2016). Yet, these political formations were disengaged from the central government programs for universal primary education. Politicians from south India vehemently *opposed* New Delhi's involvement in education, mainly due to anxieties over the linguistic domination of Hindi (Das Gupta 1970). The state legislatures of Kerala and Tamil Nadu roundly rejected the constitution's 42<sup>nd</sup> Amendment, which expanded central government authority over education.

The electoral mobilization of lower castes in north India occurred later and without a social movement legacy (Jaffrelot 2003). Political parties in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar drew lower caste support by making narrow, identity-based appeals (Pai 2002; Chandra 2004). They advanced a politics of dignity, attaching less importance to social policies like education (Mehrotra 2006). The leaders of these parties worked to install caste-based reservations, affirmative action policies in employment and higher education. The mass politics of education converged on problem of extending reservations further, which mostly affecting elite members of these social groups (Yadav 2002). Primary education for the masses gained less political attention.

## **Political Culture**

A third explanation highlights the significance of political culture. In his study of child labor, Myron Weiner (1991) argues that the Indian state's failure to enact universal and compulsory education was caused by deeply held beliefs rooted in the caste system that countenanced a hierarchical division of labor in society. State elites did not favor universal primary education, since they believed that children belonging to poor households needed to perform labor. Though it makes a strong case for policy inertia, this argument has difficulty accounting for policy *change*. Based on the conception of political culture that Weiner puts forward—a framework of shared beliefs and values—

policy change would seem to require a transformation in beliefs. Nor can his theory account for the actions taken by reformers that cut against the dominant political culture. Indeed, Weiner treats reform-minded individuals as aberrations from the norm. By contrast, I find that committed officials were not mere aberrations, but agents of change. To be sure, it took decades for their reform ideas to yield major changes in policy, though that does not make their ideas any less significant. These findings suggest that ideational disagreements and incremental diversions from widely held understandings can, with time, generate momentum for larger changes, and thus ought to be studied more closely.<sup>30</sup>

### **Concluding Remarks**

Scholars have long puzzled over why and how programmatic policies emerge in clientelistic settings (Shefter 1977; Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007). The challenge is compounded in a federal, multiethnic democracy like India's, where identity politics and weak state capacity conspire to undermine the delivery of policies like universal primary education. Under these conditions, I have shown that committed state elites pursued primary education reform gradually. Officials moved judiciously, using administrative mechanisms to overcome political obstacles to reform. Crucial political openings, made possible by the support of national leaders and the World Bank's engagement in India, helped accelerate primary school expansion. Reformers combined the institutional experience of home-grown initiatives with external assistance to scale up their ideas into a universal primary education policy. Indian civil society and judicial action solidified policy changes into law. Public demands for the state to fulfill its legal obligations to the poor have defined a new phase of policy development.

These findings demonstrate the causal weight of ideas inside the Indian state, which evolve slowly to produce programmatic policy change. They also demonstrate the limitations of state elite-led incremental reform. The growth of primary education in India reinforced the power differential between state officials, school teachers and the poor. Complicated questions of institutional accountability went unaddressed. Mechanisms of bureaucratic and patronage politics continue to affect policy implementation, notwithstanding efforts to devolve authority to local communities. Although such challenges are not unique to India's primary school system, the institutional details and politics vary across countries (Grindle 2004; Moe and Wiborg 2016). Future comparative research that examines how state elites pursue their policy



ideas in different political settings may help shed light on the possibilities and barriers to school reform.

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<sup>1</sup> For figures on school access, enrollment and infrastructure, see NUEPA (2012) and ASER (2015). On India's Midday Meal Program, see Afridi (2011).

<sup>2</sup> Author interview with retired official that helped draft 1986 NPE, February 22, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> "Chalking a New Path: Navodaya Vidyalaya—Ambitious Educational Plan Faces Numerous Pitfalls," *India Today*, June, 15, 1988.

<sup>4</sup> Naik and Bordia shared their views on non-formal education in writings and public lectures. See, for example: Naik (1977) and Bordia and Kaul (1992).

<sup>5</sup> Author interview with World Bank official, New Delhi, July 17, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Author interview with social activist, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, January 23, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> This precise phrase came up in multiple interviews with IAS officers and other bureaucrats.

<sup>8</sup> Drawn from the minutes of CABE meetings, as reported by the HRD Ministry (Government of India 1992).

<sup>9</sup> Author interview with representatives of school teacher union, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, July 27, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Author interview with retired official that worked under Rao, New Delhi, India, November 29, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> On the significance of political leaders for policy change in India, also see Varshney (1989)

<sup>12</sup> Recent biographies of Rao examine his interest in social policy. See Sitapati (2016) and Baru (2016).

<sup>13</sup> Author interview with retired official, November 29, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Author interview, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, July 21, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> The E-9 countries included India, China, Pakistan, Brazil, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Egypt, Nigeria and Mexico.

<sup>16</sup> *Report of the Committee for Re-constituting of National Elementary Education Mission (NEEM)*, Department of Education, MHRD, Government of India, January 1998.

<sup>17</sup> Author's interview with senior official from the HRD Ministry, New Delhi,

<sup>18</sup> Author's interview with education official, Dehradun, Uttarakhand, July 31, 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Author interview of former State Project Director of SSA, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, October 16, 2009.

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- <sup>20</sup> World Bank, “Extending Education to the Millions of Out-of-School Children.” [Available at: <http://go.worldbank.org/L7R3GZ7X10>.]
- <sup>21</sup> On the political incentive to provide “visible” public goods, see Mani and Mukand (2007). For an application to primary education in Africa, see Harding and Stasavage (2014).
- <sup>22</sup> Author interview with official from HRD Ministry, New Delhi,
- <sup>23</sup> Author interviews with multiple state and local education officials in
- <sup>24</sup> Even before this Supreme Court judgment, the 1990 Ramamurti Committee report mentioned that “The Right to Education should be examined for inclusion amongst the fundamental rights guaranteed under the Constitution of India.” (Ramamurti Committee 1990:120).
- <sup>25</sup> “NGOs rally to promote education for all,” *Indian Express*, March 7, 2001. [Available at: <http://expressindia.indianexpress.com/fe/daily/20010307/faf04006.html>.].
- <sup>26</sup> Interview with civil society activist, Sitapur, Uttar Pradesh, August 5, 2010.
- <sup>27</sup> “Free and Compulsory Education for Children up to 14 Years,” *Financial Express*, 5 August 2009. [Available at: <http://www.financialexpress.com/news/free-compulsory-education-for-children-up-to-14-yrs/498039>.]
- <sup>28</sup> Rapid income growth has occurred alongside rising inequality and stagnant human development, leading many to question the link between India’s economic growth and wellbeing (Kohli 2012; Dreze and Sen 2013).
- <sup>29</sup> Beyond India, Kosack (2012) finds that the political organization of the poor shaped education policy in Ghana, Taiwan and Brazil.
- <sup>30</sup> My understanding of political culture is in line with agent-centered models, as Swidler (2013) proposes.

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