



Philosophical Implications of Central Government Educational Schemes in India: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the philosophical implications of major Central Government educational schemes in India, particularly *Samagra Shiksha* and *PM POSHAN (Mid-Day Meal Scheme)*. It explores how these schemes embody principles of social justice, equality, welfare liberalism, and capability development. The study situates these policies within broader philosophical frameworks such as Rawlsian justice, Gandhian ethics, and Amartya Sen's capability approach. While these schemes aim to universalize education and reduce inequality, they also raise critical questions regarding state intervention, autonomy, and the instrumentalization of education for economic goals. The paper argues that Indian educational policy reflects a hybrid philosophical model combining welfare statist, distributive justice, and developmental pragmatism.

Introduction

Education has long been regarded as a profoundly philosophical enterprise, shaping not only individual intellect but also the moral and civic character of society. In classical thought, Plato conceived education as the process through which the soul is guided towards truth, ultimately enabling the realization of justice within the state. Similarly, Aristotle emphasized the role of education in cultivating virtue and rationality, viewing it as essential for achieving eudaimonia, or human flourishing. In the modern period, John Dewey redefined education in pragmatic terms, interpreting it as a dynamic and experiential process that prepares individuals for active participation in democratic life. These philosophical perspectives collectively underscore that education is not merely a technical or institutional activity but a normative endeavour deeply connected with questions of ethics, knowledge, and social purpose.



Within the framework of the modern welfare state, education assumes a central role as a means of ensuring social justice, equality of opportunity, and collective progress. The welfare state is premised on the idea that the government bears responsibility for providing essential services that enable citizens to lead dignified lives. Education, in this regard, is both a fundamental right and a public good. It serves as a mechanism for reducing socio-economic disparities, empowering marginalized communities, and fostering social cohesion. Philosophically, this reflects a synthesis of liberal egalitarianism and utilitarian concern for the greatest good, wherein state intervention in education is justified not only to secure individual rights but also to promote overall societal welfare.

In the Indian context, the constitutional vision of education is deeply rooted in principles of equality, justice, and human development. The insertion of the Article 21A of the Constitution of India marked a significant milestone, recognizing education as a fundamental right for children between the ages of six and fourteen. This constitutional mandate is further supported by the broader ideals enshrined in the Preamble and Directive Principles of State Policy, which emphasize social, economic, and political justice. Education, therefore, is not only an instrument of individual advancement but also a means of realizing the democratic and egalitarian aspirations of the nation.

Against this philosophical and constitutional backdrop, the Government of India has introduced several comprehensive educational schemes aimed at translating these ideals into practice. Among these, Samagra Shiksha represents a holistic approach to school education, integrating various initiatives from pre-primary to higher secondary levels with a focus on inclusivity, quality enhancement, and equitable access. Likewise, PM POSHAN plays a crucial role in addressing the intersection of education and nutrition by providing meals to schoolchildren, thereby encouraging enrolment, retention, and regular attendance.

These schemes collectively aim to achieve universal access to education by ensuring that all children, irrespective of their socio-economic background, are able to attend school. At the same time, they emphasize the principle of equity by targeting disadvantaged groups, including girls, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and economically weaker sections. The focus on quality education is reflected in efforts to improve infrastructure, teacher training, and learning outcomes, aligning educational practice with broader developmental goals. Furthermore, initiatives like PM POSHAN highlight the recognition that education cannot be separated from basic human needs such as nutrition, as improved health directly influences students' ability to learn and participate effectively in the educational process.

In sum, contemporary educational schemes in India embody a complex philosophical synthesis, wherein education is simultaneously conceived as a right, a means of social transformation, and a tool for national development. They reflect the enduring influence of classical and modern philosophical ideas while responding to the practical challenges of a diverse and unequal society.

Samagra Shiksha

The scheme of Samagra Shiksha represents one of the most comprehensive educational interventions undertaken by the Government of India, integrating earlier initiatives into a unified framework that extends from pre-school to Class XII. Conceived as a holistic programme, it seeks to address the multiple dimensions of schooling—access, equity, inclusion, quality, and the integration of digital technologies—within a single policy architecture. By encompassing early childhood care and education alongside elementary and secondary schooling, the scheme reflects a life-cycle approach to education, recognizing that foundational learning and sustained academic engagement are interdependent processes. Its emphasis on infrastructural development, teacher training, inclusive education for children with special needs, and digital learning platforms demonstrates a deliberate attempt to bridge structural inequalities that have historically characterized the Indian educational landscape.



From a philosophical standpoint, the underlying logic of Samagra Shiksha may be fruitfully interpreted through the lens of John Rawls's theory of justice, particularly his conception of "justice as fairness." Rawls argues that a just society must ensure not merely formal equality, but fair equality of opportunity, wherein social and economic inequalities are arranged so that they benefit the least advantaged. In this context, Samagra Shiksha's targeted interventions—such as special provisions for marginalized communities, gender inclusion strategies, and financial assistance to disadvantaged groups—can be seen as practical embodiments of Rawlsian distributive justice. The scheme attempts to mitigate the arbitrary effects of birth and social circumstance by creating conditions under which all children, regardless of their background, have a genuine opportunity to access and benefit from education. Thus, it moves beyond a purely formal conception of equality towards a more substantive and ethically grounded model of justice.

Equally significant is the resonance between Samagra Shiksha and the capability approach articulated by Amartya Sen. Sen's framework shifts the evaluative focus from resources or utility to the real freedoms, or "capabilities," that individuals possess to lead lives they have reason to value. Education, within this paradigm, is not merely an instrumental good but a constitutive element of human capability, enabling individuals to develop critical reasoning, participate in social and political processes, and pursue diverse life paths. The scheme's emphasis on quality education, digital literacy, and inclusive pedagogy can be understood as efforts to expand these substantive freedoms. By improving learning outcomes and ensuring that students are not merely enrolled but meaningfully engaged in the educational process, Samagra Shiksha aligns with the broader philosophical objective of enhancing human agency and empowerment.

Furthermore, the scheme reflects the normative commitments of welfare liberalism, which posits that the state has an essential role in securing the basic conditions necessary for individual flourishing. Within this framework, education is regarded as a public good that cannot be left entirely to market forces, as doing so would exacerbate existing inequalities and undermine social cohesion. The active involvement of the state in financing, regulating, and implementing educational programmes under Samagra Shiksha illustrates a commitment to this welfare-oriented vision. It affirms that access to quality education is not a matter of charity or privilege, but a right grounded in the principles of justice and collective responsibility. At the same time, the scheme raises important philosophical questions regarding the balance between centralized policy-making and local autonomy, as well as the extent to which state intervention can effectively address deeply entrenched social disparities.

In sum, Samagra Shiksha may be interpreted as a concrete manifestation of several influential philosophical ideas, synthesizing Rawlsian justice, Sen's capability approach, and the principles of welfare liberalism within the context of Indian educational policy. While its practical implementation continues to face challenges, its conceptual foundations reveal a clear commitment to transforming education into a vehicle of social justice, human development, and democratic inclusion.

PM POSHAN (Mid-Day Meal Scheme)

The PM POSHAN (earlier known as the Mid-Day Meal Scheme) constitutes one of the most significant welfare-oriented educational interventions in India, addressing the interrelated concerns of hunger, school participation, and child development. By providing cooked meals to millions of schoolchildren across the country, the scheme operates at the intersection of education and public health, recognizing that effective learning is contingent upon the fulfillment of basic nutritional needs. Empirical observations have consistently indicated that such provision enhances enrolment, improves regular attendance, and reduces dropout rates, particularly among children from economically weaker sections. In this sense, PM POSHAN does not merely supplement the educational process but actively conditions its possibility, ensuring that schooling becomes a viable and meaningful experience for a broader segment of society.



From a philosophical perspective, the scheme can be fruitfully interpreted through the framework of the ethics of care, a tradition prominently articulated by thinkers such as Carol Gilligan. The ethics of care emphasizes relational interdependence, compassion, and the moral significance of attending to the needs of others, particularly the vulnerable. Within this framework, the state is not conceived merely as an abstract guarantor of rights but as an active caregiver responsible for nurturing the well-being of its citizens. PM POSHAN exemplifies this orientation by addressing the immediate and concrete needs of children, thereby embodying a form of institutionalized care. It reflects a moral commitment to ensuring that no child's educational opportunity is undermined by hunger or malnutrition, thus foregrounding the affective and humane dimensions of public policy.

Equally significant is the scheme's role in promoting social equality, particularly within the deeply stratified context of Indian society. The practice of children from diverse caste, class, and religious backgrounds sharing a common meal within the school environment carries profound symbolic and practical implications. It challenges entrenched social hierarchies and discriminatory practices, fostering a sense of collective identity and mutual respect. In this regard, PM POSHAN may be seen as an instrument of social integration, subtly but effectively undermining the rigid boundaries that have historically divided communities. The shared meal becomes not only a nutritional intervention but also a site of ethical transformation, where the ideals of equality and fraternity are enacted in everyday life.

Furthermore, the scheme can be analyzed through the lens of utilitarianism, as articulated by philosophers such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. From a utilitarian standpoint, the moral worth of a policy is determined by its capacity to maximize overall happiness or welfare. PM POSHAN appears to fulfil this criterion by simultaneously addressing multiple dimensions of well-being: it improves nutritional outcomes, enhances educational participation, and contributes to long-term human development. The convergence of these benefits generates a cumulative increase in social welfare, making the scheme a paradigmatic example of utilitarian policy-making. However, a critical perspective might also question whether the emphasis on aggregate welfare sufficiently accounts for qualitative aspects of education, thereby inviting a more nuanced evaluation.

In sum, PM POSHAN embodies a rich confluence of philosophical ideas, integrating the ethics of care, the pursuit of social equality, and the utilitarian objective of maximizing welfare. It illustrates how a seemingly simple policy intervention can carry profound ethical significance, transforming the educational space into a locus of nourishment, inclusion, and moral development. At the same time, it invites ongoing reflection on the role of the state, the nature of equality, and the broader purposes of education in a democratic society.

PM SHRI Schools / NEP-linked initiatives

The initiative of PM SHRI Schools, situated within the broader framework of the National Education Policy 2020, represents a decisive shift towards the modernization and transformation of India's educational system. These model schools are envisioned as centers of excellence that embody the principles of the policy—integrating digital infrastructure, experiential learning, multidisciplinary curricula, and a strong emphasis on skill development. The underlying aim is not merely to expand access but to redefine the quality and relevance of education in accordance with the demands of a rapidly changing, knowledge-based economy. In this respect, education is increasingly linked with employability, innovation, and national economic growth, thereby situating schooling within a broader developmental paradigm.

Philosophically, this orientation resonates strongly with the instrumentalist conception of education articulated by John Dewey. Dewey regarded education not as an end in itself, but as a dynamic process that equips individuals with the skills and dispositions necessary for effective participation in social life. Learning, for Dewey, is grounded in experience, problem-solving, and adaptability—qualities that are central to the PM



SHRI vision of competency-based and skill-oriented education. The emphasis on critical thinking, creativity, and practical knowledge reflects a pragmatic understanding of education as a tool for social progress and democratic engagement. In this sense, the initiative embodies a forward-looking philosophy that seeks to harmonize individual development with societal advancement.

At the same time, the growing alignment between education and economic objectives invites a critical examination from the standpoint of neo-liberal theory. Neo-liberalism tends to conceptualize education as a form of human capital, wherein knowledge and skills are valued primarily for their contribution to productivity and market competitiveness. Within this framework, the focus on skill development, vocational training, and measurable learning outcomes may be interpreted as indicative of a broader shift towards the economization of education. While such an approach undoubtedly enhances employability and supports economic growth, it also raises important philosophical concerns regarding the reduction of education to an instrumental commodity. Critics argue that this risks marginalizing the intrinsic values of education—such as moral development, critical consciousness, and the cultivation of wisdom—in favour of narrowly defined economic ends.

Moreover, this tension between education as a means of holistic human development and as an instrument of economic policy reflects a deeper philosophical dilemma. On the one hand, initiatives like PM SHRI Schools demonstrate a commitment to preparing students for the practical realities of contemporary life, equipping them with the competencies required in a globalised world. On the other hand, they prompt reflection on whether an excessive emphasis on economic utility may inadvertently constrain the broader emancipatory potential of education. The challenge, therefore, lies in achieving a balanced synthesis, wherein education can simultaneously serve as a driver of economic progress and a vehicle for ethical, intellectual, and cultural enrichment.

In sum, the PM SHRI Schools initiative and NEP-linked reforms exemplify a complex interplay of philosophical ideas, combining Deweyan instrumentalism with elements of neo-liberal thought. They highlight the evolving nature of educational philosophy in the context of globalization and technological change, while also underscoring the need for a critical engagement with the purposes and values that underpin contemporary educational policy.

Critical Analysis

The philosophical analysis of contemporary educational policy in India reveals a number of deep and often competing normative tensions, which are reflected in the design and implementation of Central Government schemes. One of the most fundamental among these is the tension between education as a right and education as a welfare provision. The constitutional recognition of education through the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009 establishes it as a deontological obligation of the state, implying that access to basic education is a matter of justice rather than charity or policy discretion. From this perspective, the state is morally bound to ensure that every child receives education as an inherent entitlement. However, the operationalization of this right through schemes such as Samagra Shiksha and PM POSHAN often takes a welfare-oriented form, where benefits are distributed in a manner akin to social assistance. This creates a conceptual duality: while the normative foundation is rights-based, the practical execution remains embedded within the logic of welfare policy, thereby raising questions about the adequacy and consistency of implementation.

Closely related to this is the distinction between equality and equity, which occupies a central place in contemporary educational discourse. Formal equality presupposes that all individuals are treated identically, without regard to their differing social and economic circumstances. However, such an approach risks perpetuating existing inequalities, as it fails to account for structural disadvantages. In contrast, the emphasis



on equity within government schemes reflects a more nuanced understanding, whereby targeted interventions are designed to support historically marginalized groups, including women, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and rural populations. This shift from formal equality to substantive equity resonates strongly with the philosophical framework of John Rawls, who argues that social arrangements must be structured in a way that benefits the least advantaged. At the same time, it aligns with the capability approach of Amartya Sen, which prioritizes the expansion of real freedoms over the mere distribution of resources. By addressing disparities in access and outcomes, these schemes seek to create conditions under which individuals can genuinely exercise their educational rights.

Another significant philosophical issue concerns the relationship between the state and individual autonomy in the domain of education. The strong role played by the central government in designing, funding, and regulating educational initiatives reflects a commitment to ensuring uniform standards and broad-based inclusion. However, this centralization also raises important concerns regarding the potential limitation of institutional and individual autonomy. Questions emerge as to whether excessive state control might constrain pedagogical innovation, local contextualization, and the freedom of educators and learners. This tension echoes broader debates within political philosophy about the proper scope of state intervention, particularly within liberal traditions that emphasize individual freedom alongside collective welfare. The challenge lies in balancing the legitimate role of the state in correcting inequalities with the need to preserve the pluralistic and dialogical nature of education.

A further philosophical tension arises in the distinction between the intrinsic and instrumental value of education. On the one hand, education is widely regarded as intrinsically valuable, contributing to the holistic development of the individual, including moral, intellectual, and cultural dimensions. This perspective finds resonance in the educational philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi, whose concept of *Nai Talim* emphasizes the integration of intellectual, manual, and ethical development. On the other hand, contemporary policy increasingly foregrounds the instrumental value of education, linking it to employment, economic productivity, and national development. This instrumentalist orientation is closely associated with the pragmatism of John Dewey, who viewed education as a means of equipping individuals for effective participation in social and economic life. However, an overemphasis on instrumental outcomes risks reducing education to a mere economic tool, thereby neglecting its broader humanistic and emancipatory potential.

In evaluating the overall impact of these schemes, it is important to acknowledge their significant positive contributions. Empirical evidence suggests that initiatives such as Samagra Shiksha and PM POSHAN have played a crucial role in reducing dropout rates, enhancing school enrolment, and promoting the inclusion of marginalized groups. The integration of nutritional support with educational provision has improved not only attendance but also the cognitive and physical well-being of students, thereby creating a more conducive learning environment. These achievements reflect a meaningful advancement towards the realization of social justice and human development within the educational sphere.

Nevertheless, a critical perspective must also take into account the persistent challenges and limitations associated with these policies. Issues such as implementation gaps, under-utilization of allocated funds, and administrative inefficiencies continue to hinder their effectiveness. Furthermore, the tendency towards over-centralization may limit the responsiveness of educational programmes to local needs and contexts. Another enduring concern is the tension between quantity and quality: while access to education has expanded significantly, questions remain regarding the standard of learning outcomes and the depth of educational engagement. These critiques highlight the need for a more balanced and context-sensitive approach that integrates efficiency with equity and quality with accessibility.



In order to deepen this analysis, it is essential to situate these developments within a broader philosophical framework. The concept of justice as fairness, as articulated by Rawls, provides a normative basis for evaluating the distributive aspects of educational policy. Sen's capability approach offers a more expansive understanding of human development, emphasizing the importance of real freedoms and agency. Gandhi's *Nai Talim* introduces a holistic vision of education that integrates ethical and practical dimensions, while Dewey's pragmatism underscores the dynamic and experiential character of learning. Finally, the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire brings attention to the emancipatory potential of education, advocating for a dialogical and transformative approach that empowers learners to challenge structures of domination and inequality. Together, these perspectives provide a rich and multifaceted framework for analyzing the philosophical implications of contemporary educational schemes, enabling a more comprehensive and critical understanding of their aims, achievements, and limitations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of contemporary Central Government educational schemes in India reveals a complex and dynamic philosophical synthesis, wherein multiple normative traditions converge within the domain of public policy. Initiatives such as Samagra Shiksha, PM POSHAN, and the broader framework of the National Education Policy 2020 collectively embody a fusion of welfare ethics, capability-oriented development, and pragmatic governance. The welfare dimension is evident in the state's commitment to ensuring access, nutrition, and inclusion, reflecting a moral concern for the well-being of all citizens, particularly the disadvantaged. Simultaneously, the influence of the capability approach, most notably articulated by Amartya Sen, is discernible in the emphasis on enhancing real freedoms through quality education, thereby enabling individuals to pursue meaningful life choices. At the same time, the pragmatic orientation of policy-making, resonant with the thought of John Dewey, underscores the role of education as a practical instrument for social adaptation and national development.

However, despite this integrative framework, a fundamental philosophical tension persists at the heart of these policies—namely, the tension between education as a means of empowerment and education as an economic tool. On the one hand, education is envisioned as a transformative force that fosters critical consciousness, moral development, and democratic participation, aligning with emancipatory perspectives such as those advanced by Paulo Freire. From this standpoint, education is intrinsically valuable, serving as a pathway to human dignity, autonomy, and social justice. On the other hand, contemporary policy increasingly situates education within the logic of economic growth, prioritizing skill development, employability, and the creation of human capital. While this instrumental orientation is not without merit, particularly in a globalised and competitive economy, it risks narrowing the scope of education to purely utilitarian ends.

The enduring challenge, therefore, lies in reconciling these two dimensions in a manner that preserves the holistic and emancipatory essence of education while also responding to the practical demands of economic development. A philosophically robust educational policy must strive to maintain this delicate balance, ensuring that the pursuit of economic objectives does not eclipse the broader humanistic and ethical purposes of education. In this sense, the future trajectory of Indian educational reform will depend not merely on administrative efficiency or policy innovation, but on a sustained engagement with the philosophical ideals that underlie the very concept of education itself.



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