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CHAPTER 6

National Coalition for Education India: The Second Freedom Struggle Against Illiteracy

INTRODUCTION

Education has always been accorded an honoured place in Indian society. The great leaders of the Indian freedom movement realized the fundamental role of education and throughout the nation's struggle for independence, stressed its unique significance for national development (National Policy on Education, 1968)

India is a rising super-power with a population of over one billion people, and while India is becoming globally competitive in information and communication technologies, business, and manufacturing, it still lags behind in terms of global education standards. With more than a third of its population below the age of 18, India has the largest child population in the world, with an estimated 65 to 85 million not attending school (Census 2001). Establishing a national campaign for education in India was a long process that began in 1996 with the Bachpan Bachao Andolan campaign “Education for Liberation and Liberation for Education.” During this time several like-minded civil society organizations came together in recognition of the alarming education situation in India. After the Bachpan Bachao Andolan campaign, the National Campaign for Education (NCE) became the official representative of the Global Campaign for Education (GCE) in India, and vowed to make significant changes in the education system. The NCE is now a recognized civil society player for the betterment of education in India and has strong representation in the GCE. Along with many other organizations, the NCE strive to achieve Education for All (EFA).

In light of the World Education Conference in Jomtien (1990), education is a globally recognized need. At a local level however, the importance of education has been recognized since India’s independence in 1947, specifically in Article 45 of their constitution. Since that time, the political and economic situation has vastly improved, affording the opportunity to get every child in school. With the 2002 93rd Constitutional Amendment making education a fundamental right, paired with the recently passed “Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009,” (RTE Act, see Government of India 2009) the legal tools are now available to truly affect change in education in India. However, politically speaking, there is little focus on implementing the act and following through on their 60 year old promise of
universal education. At the executive level there is a persistent belief in the beneficial economic trickle-down effect of large scale infrastructure programs, and thus the government's primary focus is on large scale economic endeavours such as mines and dams, and the notion that the revenue garnered from such activities will eventually benefit the social sector has gone unchallenged (Behar and Prakash 2004). While the current government supports civil society efforts for education at a rhetorical level, education is yet to take a higher priority in terms of action (see CMP 2004).

This case study analyses the impact of the NCE in India, taking in factors such as interaction from local to global levels, negotiations on objectives, strategies, and internal and external power relations that have shown to be influential on its impact. The primary data consists of twenty semi-structured interviews with key people within the NCE, GCE, member organizations, academics, and other key informants that were conducted in August to November 2009 in New Delhi, India. Other data includes internal and external publications of the NCE, as well as government documents and media resources.

The following chapter is broken down into five sections. The first one discusses the country context with a focus on the political climate and the education situation. The second section discusses the origins, composition, and goals of the NCE, as well as its relations with other organizations at the supra-national level. The third section covers the collective action repertoires of the NCE and how it has changed through time. The fourth section discusses the political, procedural, and symbolic impact of the NCE. The final section lays out the main conclusions of this case study with lessons learned and recommendations.

Country Context

The Republic of India is located in South Asia. The population as of 2008 is over one billion, making it a significant global player by its size alone. India consists of 28 states and seven union territories with two national languages, Hindi and English, although many more unofficial languages exist. In 1947, India gained independence from the British, and is now the largest democracy in the world. India is remarkable in its conviction that its people are its greatest asset:

In the Indian way of thinking, a human being is a positive asset and a precious national resource, which needs to be cherished, nurtured, and developed with tenderness, and care, coupled with dynamism. Each individual’s growth presents a different range of problems and requirements, at every stage from the womb to the tomb. The catalytic action of education in this complex and dynamic growth process needs to be planned meticulously and executed with great sensitivity (National Policy on Education (1986), revised in 1992)

Even before independence in 1947, the government of India in 1944 prepared a 40-year education plan that promised to provide universal free and compulsory education to all citizens (Tilak 2009). The excerpt from legislation dating back to