

# Education as Discourse: Classroom and Open Schooling in Indian Cultural and Literary Contexts

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Education in India has historically functioned as an influential social institution through which knowledge, language and cultural validity are produced and regulated. Far from being a neutral system of instruction, it has continuously echoed dynamic relations of power shaped by colonial history, postcolonial development and contemporary technological transformation. In recent years, this system has entered a phase where it is undergoing a structural and epistemological transition shaped by the coexistence of conventional classroom education and emerging models of open and digital learning. This shift has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and further consolidated through the policy framework of the National Education Policy 2020, which emphasizes on flexibility, digital integration and multidisciplinary scholarship.

The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a critical inflexion point in this transformation, disrupting the physical centrality of classrooms and accelerating dependence on digital learning infrastructures. This shift uncovered both the possibilities and inequalities embedded in technology-mediated education, particularly in a country marked by significant socio-economic and geographical disparities.

Open schooling systems, supported by institutions such as National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) and Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), expand educational access by offering flexible learning pathways to marginalized learners, including women, rural students and working individuals. However, the identification of persistent challenges related to digital inequality, language hierarchy and technological dependency that complicate the democratizing potential of open education is also necessary for realistic analysis. Within this context, classroom education continues to represent institutional authority, structured pedagogy and linguistic standardization, especially through the dominance of English-medium instruction. It remains closely associated with academic legitimacy and upward social mobility. However, its rigid structure also excludes large sections of learners who are unable to conform to its temporal, economic or geographical demands.

Positioning education as a spot of cultural production rather than a neutral institutional mechanism, the paper engages with English Literature and critical theory to examine how schooling systems shape identity, language competence and social mobility. Drawing upon the theoretical insights of Paulo Freire, Pierre Bourdieu, and Michel Foucault, the study argues that classroom education in India continues to function as a structured site of disciplinary knowledge and linguistic privilege, particularly through the dominance of English-medium instruction.

This study situates the classroom against the open schooling divide within the broader theoretical frameworks of English Literature and cultural studies, treating education as a discursive system shaped by language, ideology and institutional power. The paper discusses that the future of Indian education is not defined by the replacement of

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classroom education with open schooling but by the gradual emergence of hybrid pedagogical systems shaped by technological integration, linguistic negotiation, and socio-cultural inclusivity

Modern education in India emerged through colonial reformation, where English language instruction became core of administrative governance. The educational reforms influenced by Thomas Babington Macaulay established English as a medium of intellectual authority, shaping lasting linguistic hierarchies. Postcolonial education also retained many colonial structures, reinforcing English as an indicator of social mobility and institutional legitimacy. Classroom education, thus, advanced into a cultural system where language regulates access to opportunity.

Indian English literature reflects these tensions, portraying education as both aspiration and constraint in works such as *The English Teacher* and *Untouchable*. These texts reveal how education operates as a site of identity formation and social stratification in a complex social environment.

Contemporary studies on Indian education focus more and more on the tensions between institutional classroom systems and emergent models of open and digital learning. Within this discourse, classroom education is frequently characterized as a structured, hierarchical system shaped by standardized curricula, examination-driven assessment and institutional authority. A significant body of research highlights the role of English-medium instruction in strengthening educational stratification in India. This linguistic hierarchy remains to structure both school and higher education systems, even in postcolonial contexts. Modern day realities are no different as the beliefs of the masses haven't changed much even in today's day and age.

In contrast, scholarship on open schooling emphasizes its potential to democratize education by providing flexible learning pathways for learners excluded from formal institutions expanding access to women, rural students and working individuals. However, researchers also note that open schooling is not free from structural limitations, particularly those arising from digital inequality, infrastructural gaps and reduced interpersonal engagement. Recent studies further examine the impact of digital transformation and the COVID-19 pandemic on education systems in India. The shift toward online learning has revealed deep disparities in technological access, particularly between urban and rural populations. While digital education expands opportunities for flexible learning, it also intensifies existing inequalities based on geography, income and access to devices.

Despite growing scholarship on these individual dimensions, there remains a lack of integrated analysis that connects classroom education, open schooling, linguistic privilege, gender disparity, rural-urban inequality and digital pedagogy within a unified theoretical framework. This study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework grounded in critical pedagogy, cultural sociology and post-structural thought. These perspectives collectively enable an understanding of education as a system shaped by power, language and institutional structures.

Paulo Freire's concept of critical pedagogy provides a foundational lens for analyzing hierarchical education systems. Freire critiques traditional models of education that position learners as passive recipients of knowledge, emphasizing instead dialogic and emancipatory forms of learning. In the Indian context, this framework is particularly relevant to classroom systems that rely heavily on rote learning and teacher-centred instruction.

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital further explains how educational institutions reproduce social inequality. According to Bourdieu, education systems reward dominant cultural forms, particularly language proficiency and institutional familiarity. In India, English-language competence functions as a form of cultural capital that determines access to elite education and professional mobility.

Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power offers another critical dimension by examining how institutions regulate individuals through surveillance, normalization and structured discipline. Classroom education, in this sense, operates as a disciplinary space where behaviour, knowledge and evaluation are systematically controlled.

Ivan Illich's critique of institutional schooling provides a counterpoint to formal education systems by questioning the necessity of institutionalized learning itself. His concept of "deschooling" becomes relevant in the context of open schooling and digital education, where learning increasingly occurs outside traditional classroom boundaries.

Together, these theoretical perspectives allow for a comprehensive analysis of Indian education as a system shaped by intersecting forces of language, authority and technological transformation.

Classroom education in India represents the dominant institutional model of learning, characterized by structured curricula, physical classrooms, standardized assessment systems and teacher-centred pedagogy. It continues to function as a primary site of knowledge transmission and institutional certification. This system is closely associated with English-medium instruction, particularly in urban and elite educational institutions. English proficiency within classroom settings often determines academic success and future employment opportunities, thereby reinforcing linguistic and social hierarchies.

While classroom education provides structured learning environments that facilitate interaction, discipline and collective engagement, it also reinforces rigid academic frameworks that prioritize memorization and examination performance. The pressure of standardized testing and competitive evaluation contributes to academic stress and limits opportunities for critical and creative learning. From a cultural perspective, the classroom functions as an ideological space where institutional authority is reproduced. Teacher-student hierarchies, disciplinary practices and evaluation mechanisms collectively shape the production of educational knowledge within this system.

Within the framework of English Literature and cultural studies, the classroom may also be interpreted as an ideological and performative institution rather than merely a pedagogical space. The Indian classroom functions as a site where language, authority, discipline and social identity are continuously negotiated. English-medium educational institutions in particular often cultivate forms of speech, behaviour and cultural expression associated with urban middle-class respectability and intellectual legitimacy. Students trained within elite institutional environments are frequently perceived as more academically capable and socially refined, even when such perceptions are shaped by linguistic privilege rather than actual intellectual superiority. The classroom therefore contributes in the construction of symbolic power through language and institutional culture.

The role of English within classroom education remains especially significant in the Indian context. English-medium schools and universities are commonly associated with higher-quality education, better employment opportunities and global competitiveness. As a result, access to English-language classroom instruction often determines access to professional and social mobility. This linguistic hierarchy contributes to the marginalization of regional languages and creates divisions between students educated in elite urban institutions and those from vernacular or rural educational backgrounds. The institutional classroom thus reproduces not only academic knowledge but also forms of cultural capital linked to class privilege and linguistic authority.

Institutional learning environments also create structured academic routines that may help students develop discipline, consistency, and interpersonal skills. Group discussions, classroom debates, seminars, and extracurricular activities contribute to forms of social learning that are difficult to replicate entirely within isolated digital or open learning systems. For many learners, especially younger students, the classroom provides a sense of academic community and psychological stability that remains central to educational development.

However, the limitations of conventional classroom systems have become increasingly visible in contemporary India. Institutional education often excludes students who cannot conform to rigid attendance schedules, financial demands, or geographical requirements. Rural students, economically marginalized learners, working individuals, women with domestic responsibilities and differently abled students frequently encounter barriers within traditional educational structures.

Moreover, the standardization of classroom pedagogy may neglect diverse learning styles and individual educational needs. The pressure to perform within competitive institutional systems has also contributed to widespread concerns regarding student anxiety, mental health and academic burnout.

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a critical turning point in Indian education, accelerating the shift toward digital and hybrid learning systems. The sudden transition from physical classrooms to online platforms revealed both the potential and limitations of technology-mediated education.

The pandemic exposed many of these structural vulnerabilities. As schools and universities shifted abruptly to online platforms, the dependence of classroom education on physical institutional spaces became evident. Simultaneously, the transition to digital learning demonstrated that educational participation could occur beyond conventional classrooms, thereby challenging long-standing assumptions regarding institutional pedagogy. Yet the pandemic also revealed how deeply unequal access to technology and internet infrastructure remained across India. Consequently, while classroom education continues to retain institutional authority and cultural prestige, its dominance is increasingly being questioned within an educational landscape shaped by flexibility, digital transformation, and expanding alternative learning systems.

This system is particularly significant for learners who face structural barriers in accessing formal education, including women, rural students, working individuals and those who have experienced interrupted schooling. Open education thus functions as a mechanism of inclusion within the broader Indian educational landscape. The rise of digital learning has further expanded the reach of open schooling. Online platforms, recorded lectures and digital resources have transformed the accessibility of educational content. However, this transformation is accompanied by significant challenges, particularly the digital divide, which limits access for students without reliable internet connectivity or technological infrastructure.

While open schooling enhances flexibility and autonomy, it also reduces direct interpersonal engagement, which may affect learner motivation and academic continuity. Therefore, it operates simultaneously as a system of democratization and technological dependency.

As English occupies a central position in the Indian education system as both a medium of instruction and a marker of social status. Its dominance is historically rooted in colonial education systems and continues to shape contemporary academic structures. In both classroom and open education systems, English functions as a form of cultural capital that determines access to institutional privilege, higher education and employment opportunities. Students proficient in English are often perceived as academically superior, regardless of subject knowledge.

This linguistic hierarchy marginalizes learners from vernacular backgrounds and reinforces social stratification. Even within digital and open learning environments, English remains the dominant language of instruction, thereby extending its influence across educational systems. Thus, English operates not only as a communicative tool but also as a mechanism of cultural and institutional power within Indian education.

The comparative analysis of classroom education and open schooling discloses that both systems function within overlapping yet distinct educational frameworks. Classroom education emphasizes institutional authority, structured pedagogy and linguistic hierarchy, while open schooling prioritizes flexibility, accessibility and learner autonomy. Despite these differences, both systems are increasingly converging due to digital revolution and policy reforms. Hybrid learning models now integrate features of both classroom and open education, reducing the rigidity of traditional boundaries.

However, neither system fully resolves structural inequalities related to language, gender, geography and digital access. Both remain embedded within broader socio-economic hierarchies that shape educational outcomes in India. Both systems operate not as mutually exclusive structures but as interconnected educational models shaped by overlapping historical, cultural, linguistic and technological forces. However, neither system can be understood in

isolation, as both are embedded within broader socio-economic inequalities and evolving pedagogical transformations influenced by policy frameworks such as National Education Policy 2020.

The physical presence of schools and universities fosters interpersonal communication, peer engagement and structured mentorship, which contribute to holistic educational development. Additionally, classroom systems are widely recognized within Indian society as markers of academic credibility and social prestige, particularly when associated with English-medium instruction and elite institutional networks.

In contrast, open schooling challenges the exclusivity of institutional education by expanding participation among marginalized groups, including women, rural students and working individuals.

From a pedagogical perspective, classroom education and open schooling differ significantly in their approach to knowledge transmission and learner engagement. Classroom systems rely heavily on direct instruction, teacher authority and structured evaluation, whereas open schooling encourages self-directed learning and independent study. While the former promotes guided intellectual development within a collective environment, the latter emphasizes flexibility and individual responsibility. However, this distinction is increasingly blurred due to the integration of digital technologies and hybrid learning models, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The issue of English-language privilege further complicates the comparison between the two systems. Classroom education, especially within urban and elite institutions, often reinforces English as the dominant medium of instruction, thereby linking linguistic proficiency with academic success and social mobility. Open schooling, while initially more flexible in accommodating regional languages, is also increasingly influenced by English-dominated digital platforms and online educational content. As a result, both systems participate in the reproduction of linguistic hierarchies, although classroom education tends to institutionalize them more explicitly.

Gender and geographical disparities also play a crucial role in shaping the effectiveness of both educational models. Classroom education, due to its fixed schedules and institutional demands, often disadvantages women learners and students from rural or economically marginalized backgrounds. Open schooling offers an alternative pathway that enables continued education for such groups by reducing structural barriers. However, the effectiveness of open schooling remains dependent on access to digital infrastructure, which is unevenly distributed across rural and urban regions. Consequently, while open education reduces certain barriers, it simultaneously introduces new forms of inequality related to technology and digital literacy.

The influence of digital pedagogy and artificial intelligence has further transformed the comparative relationship between classroom and open education. AI-driven learning platforms, online classrooms, and digital educational resources have introduced elements of flexibility into traditional classroom systems, while also formalizing open schooling through structured digital frameworks.

This convergence suggests that the distinction between the two systems is becoming increasingly porous. Educational experiences today often involve hybrid models in which students engage with both physical classrooms and digital platforms, reflecting a broader shift toward integrated learning ecosystems.

Nevertheless, the comparative analysis also reveals persistent structural inequalities that neither system has fully resolved. Issues related to socio-economic disparity, linguistic hierarchy, digital divide and regional imbalance continue to shape educational outcomes in both classroom and open schooling environments. While policy initiatives such as NEP 2020 aim to address these challenges through flexible and inclusive frameworks, their effectiveness ultimately depends on infrastructural implementation and equitable access to resources.

Therefore, the relationship between classroom education and open schooling in India should not be understood as a binary opposition but rather as a dynamic continuum shaped by historical legacies and contemporary transformations.

Both systems contribute in different ways to the broader objective of educational development, yet both are also constrained by structural inequalities embedded within Indian society.

The future of education in India lies not in substituting one system with another but in developing hybrid pedagogical models that integrate institutional rigor with inclusive access as well as lies in the gradual integration of these models into a more inclusive, flexible and technologically adaptive educational ecosystem. The National Education Policy 2020 provides a framework for this transformation, although its success depends on addressing persistent inequalities in infrastructure, language and technology.

Ultimately, it is improbable to be defined by a choice between classroom education and open schooling. Instead, it is moving toward a hybrid and integrated model that works on interconnecting the strengths of both systems. Such a model must prioritize inclusivity, linguistic diversity, technological accessibility and pedagogical flexibility while addressing persistent structural disparities. Only through such a stable and reasonable approach can education in India move closer to its democratic and transformative potential, as envisioned in contemporary educational reforms.

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