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The Ford Foundation and Educational Development in Early Post-Colonial India, 1951-1963

by Lourens van Haaften

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Abstract

After independence in 1947, India started a complex trajectory of decolonization, state formation, and democratization. In this context, education was imagined and mobilized as a critical instrument in addressing the manifold challenges of nation-building. India's educational future was a matter of concern that transcended internal political dynamics and attracted the attention of numerous transnational organizations and state powers. As the world's largest democracy, India was perceived as a critical site for the outcome of the unfolding Cold War power struggle and for establishing geopolitical stability. In my research, I am interested in the way that transnational networks of educational experts, consultants, bureaucrats, and politicians explored the domain of education as an instrument for development during the 1950s and early 1960s. I want to understand how educational development formed a contested terrain for geopolitical influence. As part of my research on the influence of transnational networks on educational reforms in India, I focused on the role of the Ford Foundation. In this report, I highlight some of my preliminary findings. I describe how the Foundation became involved in questions of educational development in India, and how it succeeded in gaining a prominent place in the inner circle networks that developed new educational strategies and reform in India in the late 1950s.

Introduction

My research at the Rockefeller Archive Center is part of a research project that examines the role of transnational networks in the politics of education in India in the early postcolonial period from 1947 to 1963. With independence in 1947, India started the simultaneous processes of decolonization, nation-building, and state formation. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Nehru, the political challenges were more than substantial and included maintaining national unity, establishing a viable democracy, and creating economic development that could lift the country from poverty. Education was imagined and mobilized as a critical instrument in addressing these challenges. However, the educational structures that India inherited from the British at the time of independence did not answer the needs of the new nation-building and state formation project. Problems such as unequal access to schools along the lines of caste, gender, and religion; huge regional disparities; the unsolved question of vocational education; the shortcomings of teachers' training; ingrained pedagogies of rote learning; and the focus of universities on professional training all conspired against the vision of an independent, modern, and self-sufficient India. Education in all its forms, from lower to higher education, consequently formed an essential terrain or field for the developmental politics of the early post-colonial period.

India's educational future was a matter of concern that transcended the internal political dynamics and attracted the attention of diverse movements, organizations, and state powers. These actors were concerned with the making of a new world order from the ruins of the World Wars in a period that was marked by political instabilities caused by decolonization and the unfolding Cold War. India was perceived by these actors as a critical site that would not only define the trajectory of the country itself, but of the wider region and the postcolonial world. State powers and international organizations showed a strong interest in co-shaping educational policies in India during the 1950s.

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how educational development formed a contested terrain for geopolitical influence. As part of my research on the influence of transnational networks on educational reforms in India, I focused on the role of the Ford Foundation. I looked into the archival holdings of the Rockefeller Archive Center in Sleepy Hollow, New York, to consult with the records of the Ford Foundation, the Fund for the Advancement of Education (TFAE), and the personal records of several key actors, such as Douglas Ensminger and Champion F. Ward.¹ In this report, I will give a brief outline of the main preliminary findings.

Gaining a Place in the Inner Political Networks behind Educational Reform

The Ford Foundation became active in India in 1951, after receiving an invitation from Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to assist in setting up the Community Development Programme.² The initial focus of the Foundation was on rural development, not education. Yet, soon after it started the collaboration with the Indian central government, it expanded its activities to other domains, including the educational sector. The records suggest that United States Ambassador Chester Bowles was the key individual encouraging the Foundation to directly engage with questions of educational reform.³ The motive behind his initiative to get the Ford Foundation involved in developing India's educational sectors was to a high extent prompted by the fear that India would fall under communism, as China had in 1949. Reforming and expanding India's education system was seen as a critical step in fostering a democratic culture and enhancing the economic productivity needed to create political stability in the young nation. As direct involvement of the US government in the field of education was considered politically too salient in the context of a decolonizing society, the US ambassador saw the involvement of the Ford Foundation as a good alternative. Nehru's cabinet was receptive to the suggestion for collaboration with the Foundation in the domain of educational reform. As other scholars have shown in their work, the Nehru cabinet valued the Foundation as a broker of innovative ideas and knowledge, for offering a great international network of expertise, and as an attractive partner for

funding those activities that were either politically too risky or would provoke bureaucratic resistance.⁴

In 1952, the Indian Ministry of Education invited Philip Coombs – the research director of the Fund for the Advancement of Education (TFAE) – to visit India and to give advice on possible projects in the field of education for the Ford Foundation.⁵ The TFAE was a semi-independent organization that was set up by the Foundation in 1951 to enhance educational development across the world. Coombs, who later (in 1961) would be appointed by John F. Kennedy as the assistant secretary of state for educational and culture, made a research trip to India in 1952. He started his five-week stay with a plane ride in the company of Bowles, to familiarize himself with the educational realities in the country. With Bowles, he discussed how educational reform could be instrumental to achieving economic progress in the country in the foreseeable future. Coombs subsequently visited numerous educational development projects and had meetings with politicians and educationalists across the country. Just before leaving India, he had a short interaction with Nehru to discuss the Foundation's potential role in enhancing educational capacities in the country.⁶

Coombs produced a report that laid the basis for the Ford Foundation's funding program in the field of education in the following decade. The report explicitly stressed that considering the scope of India's educational system, there were "severe limits to what a private organization could do to help advance Indian education." Coombs advised the Foundation to follow a bottom-up approach and to fund those projects that found strong support from the Indian ministry. He saw for the Ford Foundation a role as a "catalytic agent." The aim was to help India "set the pattern for a broad scale remodeling and expansion of the educational system," and to support activities in the direction wherever the "chemistry" was favorable to it. With relatively modest amounts of funding, "injected at the right points in the right ways," the Foundation aimed at having a "leverage" effect in developing the educational system in India in such a way that the democratic project could be safeguarded and economic progress could be constituted. The report was sensitive to the political saliency of foreign actors interfering in reforming an educational system in a post-colonial society. It advised letting the Indian government take the lead in setting priorities and defining the agenda. In practice, this implied that all projects supported by the Foundation were co-

funded by the Indian central state to avoid any suspicion of pushing a “Western” agenda.

In 1953, the Ford Foundation started to invest in developing close ties with the key actors responsible for educational policies in India. In the fall of that year, it funded a visit of Humayun Kabir – the “secretary” of the Indian Ministry of Education – to the US. Kabir was a prominent Bengali intellectual, poet, and educationalist, who took several different roles in the Nehru cabinets during the 1950s and early 1960s.⁷ During a five-week stay in the US, he visited the Foundation headquarters to discuss further cooperation in the field of education and met several of the key actors, including Coombs and the permanent representative for the Foundation in India, Douglas Ensminger. He also delivered a speech at a UNESCO session and discussed with diplomats, leaders, and experts the educational future of India as part of the wider politics of restoration after the Second World War, the unfolding Cold War dynamics, and decolonization. During his stay in New York, Kabir – who was referred to as India’s “Mr. Education,” in the Foundation’s internal communication – laid further groundwork for close collaboration between the Indian central government and the Foundation in the domain of education for the years that followed.

In Delhi, Ensminger was responsible for managing the developmental projects in which the Ford Foundation got involved, and therefore too occupied to be directly involved in the nitty-gritty of educational reforms and development. In 1954, the Foundation appointed Champion Ward, the former dean of the University of Chicago, as the “educational consultant” in India for four years.⁸ Ward was made responsible for the daily affairs of the Foundation’s involvement in the educational sector. He developed a close working relationship with Kabir, as well as with India’s “additional secretary” for the Ministry of Education, Khwaja Ghulam Saiyidain. They provided him access to expert meetings organized by the Indian Ministry of Education. Ward was a constant presence in expert meetings on educational issues on the national, and sometimes state, level. In this form, Ward developed into a silent but relatively influential actor in several policy debates. Ward, Ensminger, Kabir, and Saiyidain formed a tight network of actors aimed at establishing reforms in India’s educational system. The archival records show how they communicated directly on a weekly and sometimes even daily basis about setting up new initiatives and navigating political resistance in the Indian

bureaucracies in their attempts to reform India's educational system.⁹ It was through these contacts that the Foundation succeeded in gaining a prominent place in the inner circle networks that developed new educational strategies and reform in India in the late 1950s.

The Ford Foundation as an Educational Actor in India: Practices and Activities

The Ford Foundation's involvement in educational development in India concerned many projects and activities and it is almost impossible to map them comprehensively. As other scholars have pointed out, pedagogy and education formed an essential dimension in rural village development programs to which the Foundation contributed. It facilitated the establishment of several "extension centres" where adults received training as village workers. The Foundation also played a large role in setting up an educational infrastructure to reform India's agricultural sector, by co-financing the establishment of several rural universities.¹⁰ Scholars have also noted how it contributed to the development of emerging academic fields and disciplines, such as engineering, law and legal education, statistics, medicine, and management science by co-financing the creation of new institutes.¹¹ The focus of my current research is limited to the projects in which the Foundation collaborated with the central government in attempts to constitute reforms in India's educational system.

Kabir, Saiydain, and Ward considered the field of secondary education as critical in reshaping India's educational system. The reform of teacher training institutes was an important focus point. In 1955, the Ford Foundation provided funding for the establishment of twenty-four (later thirty-one) Extension Service Centers at teacher training colleges.¹² In parallel, the Foundation subsidized the establishment of the so-called "Secondary Education Study Team," appointed by the Indian ministry.¹³ The team consisted of Indian and foreign experts who were assigned to study secondary education and teacher training institutions in the US, UK, Denmark, and India to prepare recommendations for the Ministry of Education. The objective was to study

how the “new methods and techniques of teaching and the new approaches to curriculum worked out in American Secondary Schools and to gain insight into the best practices of teacher training overseas.” The Foundation funded several activities aimed at diffusing this new knowledge and ideas among educational practitioners in the country. For example, it provided support for the organization of twenty seminars for secondary school headmasters across the country to discuss curricular changes and seminars on best practices in educational administration.

The Ford Foundation also got involved in modifications of the bureaucratic structures of educational governance. Shortly after independence, in 1949, the Indian government installed a permanent University Grants Committee (UGC) to oversee and regulate the higher education sector. In practice, this institution played a hegemonic role in defining educational policies in different domains. With the Foundation’s support, Kabir and Saiyidain were successful in establishing an Indian Council for Secondary Education as an organization that was meant to counterweight the influence of the UGC. The Foundation provided the new organization with financial resources to develop numerous activities to constitute change and reform in the secondary educational sector. Also, assistance was provided in the establishment of a “Bureau of Educational Research” – an organization that was intended to enhance scientific approaches to education and pedagogy in India’s educational landscape.

In the field of primary education, the activities of the Foundation were limited. It was occasionally involved in the development of basic education (Nai Talim) - a form of pedagogy aimed to overcome the distinction between knowledge and work, based on Gandhian ideas of social order. In 1954, it organized a tour of Indian rural educators to study the Danish folk high school movement as a source of inspiration and for studying elements that could be applied in India.

The Ford Foundation also supported the Ministry of Education in a large project aimed at implementing the principles of “general education” in Indian undergraduate education at universities. In American higher education institutions, a movement had started during the 1930s that worked on the development of a general education curriculum. The initiative was a response to growing concerns that the increasing

specialization and fragmentation of knowledge would alienate students from each other and undermine the democratic and liberal nature of society. The curriculum was meant to provide students with a shared understanding of the key works in natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities, in order to give them a shared horizon to understand their role and place in society. Already in 1949, the Indian UGC had embraced the idea of general education as part of the nation-building agenda. The first attempts to introduce general education in Indian universities were made in the early 1950s, but without significant results.

The agenda to implement general education in India's universities received a strong boost when the Ford Foundation embraced the project. Champion Ward, who had been deeply involved with the general education movement in the US in his previous position as dean of the University of Chicago, played a critical role in this. After he arrived in New Delhi, he worked closely with the UGC to roll out several activities to promote the adoption of the principles of general education in Indian universities. In 1954, the Foundation and the Government of India launched an "Indo-American Curricular Project in General Education" which consisted of several elements.¹⁴ In June 1955, the Foundation provided support to set up a conference on the theme of general education for vice-chancellors of India's largest universities. In 1957, it funded a "general education study team" to research the features of higher education in the US. The study team spent eight weeks in the US, visiting several Ivy League schools, with the particular goal of investigating the practices of US-style liberal education and preparing recommendations on the implementation of general education in India's educational system. In the period from 1954 to 1967, the Foundation collaborated with the UGC in organizing several study exchange visits, and conferences for university teachers and administrators, the development of new course materials and more. It also provided several substantial grants to directly support some of the major universities (the Universities of Aligarh, Baroda, and Delhi) for implementing the principles of general education in their curriculum. After Ward's contract ended, the Foundation appointed Hans Simons as a special consultant for general education. He was seconded to the University Grant Commission with the special task of managing the activities in this project during the 1960s.

In conclusion, during the 1950s and 1960s, the Ford Foundation developed into a relevant actor in the educational development politics in India. A mid-term evaluation report shows that by 1957, it had spent a significant 4,4 million dollars of a total budget of 19 million dollars in India on education.¹⁵ In the years that followed, the investments of the Foundation in educational projects in India would only increase. As the outline above indicates, most activities were directed towards the objective of setting up transnational networks of experts, facilitating an exchange of ideas and knowledge, and diffusing new standards in educational and pedagogical practices.

Points for Further Research

The collections at the RAC contains a wealth of materials that allowed me to study the Ford Foundation's significant role as an educational actor in the period of early post-colonial nation-building in India. Developing and reforming India's educational sector formed a substantial part of the Foundation's activities in the country. Although the educational dimensions of its developmental work in South Asia have been highlighted by scholars, the story of the close collaboration between the Foundation and the Indian government in attempts to reform and build India's educational sector in the 1950s and 1960s has not yet received much scholarly attention.

My archival visit has opened up several new research questions and threads that I would like to further explore. The materials that I collected offered me new insights into the kind of activities, programs, and practices in which the Foundation collaborated with the Indian government. I will conduct further research in Indian archives and archives from other international and national organizations to analyze how these activities should be understood, as a part of the broader geopolitical constellation of transnational forces that was involved in reshaping educational practices in post-colonial India. The records were also useful in throwing light on the character of the relationship between the Foundation and the Indian Government. My findings in the Rockefeller Archive Center together with materials from other archives allow to analyze the extent to which the different actors had diverging ideas about the role of education in creating a post-colonial world order. One of the things that draws

my attention was that several of the actors who worked for the Ford Foundation in India during the 1950s would play important roles for other organizations that later became important drivers for the internationalization of educational governance during the late 1960s and 1970s, such as the OECD, UNESCO, and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). As part of my project, I will further explore the extent to which the experiences in India informed and influenced the process of internationalization of education during the 1960s and 1970s, and the constitution of what has been described in the literature as the rise of the “global educational complex.”

¹ I visited the Rockefeller Archive Center (hereafter RAC) in July 2023. I want to thank Renee Pappous and the other archivists of the Center for their generous support and helpful guidance.

² Corinna R. Unger, “Towards Global Equilibrium: American Foundations and Indian Modernization, 1950s to 1970s,” *Journal of Global History* 6, no. 1 (March 2011): 121–42, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022811000076>; Corinna R. Unger, *Entwicklungspfade in Indien: Eine Internationale Geschichte 1947-1980* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2015); Nicole Sackley, “Foundation in the Field: The Ford Foundation’s New Delhi Office and the Construction of Development Knowledge, 1951-1970,” in *American Foundations and the Coproduction of World Order in the Twentieth Century*, ed. John Krige and Helke Rausch, Schriftenreihe der FRIAS School of History 4 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), 232–60.

³ Coombs, ‘Report on Trip to India,’ January 1953, Ford Foundation Records (hereafter FFR) Catalogued report 000154, RAC

⁴ Sackley, “Foundation in the Field: The Ford Foundation’s New Delhi Office and the Construction of Development Knowledge, 1951-1970”; Unger, “Towards Global Equilibrium.”

⁵ Coombs, ‘Report on Trip to India,’ January 1953, FFR Catalogued report 000154, RAC.

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ Mail conversations on Kabir’s travels. FFR, The Fund for the Advancement of Education, Box 15, Folder, Kabir US Itinerary 1952-1955; RAC.

⁸ Mail conversation between Ward, Ensminger and Hill. FFR, International Division, Office Files of Forrest Hill, Series 1, Box 1, Folder 17, Education in India – Correspondence with Douglas Ensminger 1953-1955, RAC.

⁹ Ensminger mentions that “over the years they [Kabir, Saiyidain and Ward] became fast friends.” FFR, Special Collection, Douglas Ensminger Oral History. Box 23. “The Ford Foundation’s interest and involvement in Indian Education”, p.7, RAC.

¹⁰ In 1954, the Foundation organized a tour of Indian rural educators to study the Danish folk high school movement for possible application in India. This was followed by setting up a new international study team on International Rural Higher Education in 1954/55.

¹¹ Dhruv Raina, “Engineering Science Education and the Indian Institutes of Technology: Reframing the Context of the ‘Cold War and Science’ (1950–1970),” *Contemporary Education Dialogue* 14, no. 1 (January 2017): 49–70, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0973184916678698>; Unger, *Entwicklungspfade in Indien*; David Arnold, *The New Cambridge History of India: Science, Technology and Medicine in Colonial India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), <http://assets.cambridge.org/97805215/63192/sample/9780521563192wsc00.pdf>; In a previous study, I looked into the Foundation’s critical role in the development of management science and education in India, with the creation of the Indian Institutes of Management in Ahmedabad and Kolkata. Lourens van Haaften, “Management Science and Nation Building: The Sociotechnical Imaginary behind the Making of the Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad,” *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 58, no. 3 (June 13, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/00194646211020308>.

¹² Grant “Strengthening of General Education programs in India”. FFR, Grants, the University Grants Commission of India, FA732C, reel r0892, RAC.

¹³ Edward Pires and Harold Dent, “Teachers and Curricula in Secondary Schools: Report of a Study by an International Study Team,” FFR, Catalogued Report, 000526, RAC.

¹⁴ University Grants Commission (India) (06200163); 1962 February 21–1966 March 31; FFR, Grants, RAC.

¹⁵ The Ford Foundation and Foundation-supported activities in India 1951–1956 (New Delhi 1957). FFR, catalogued report 002816, RAC.