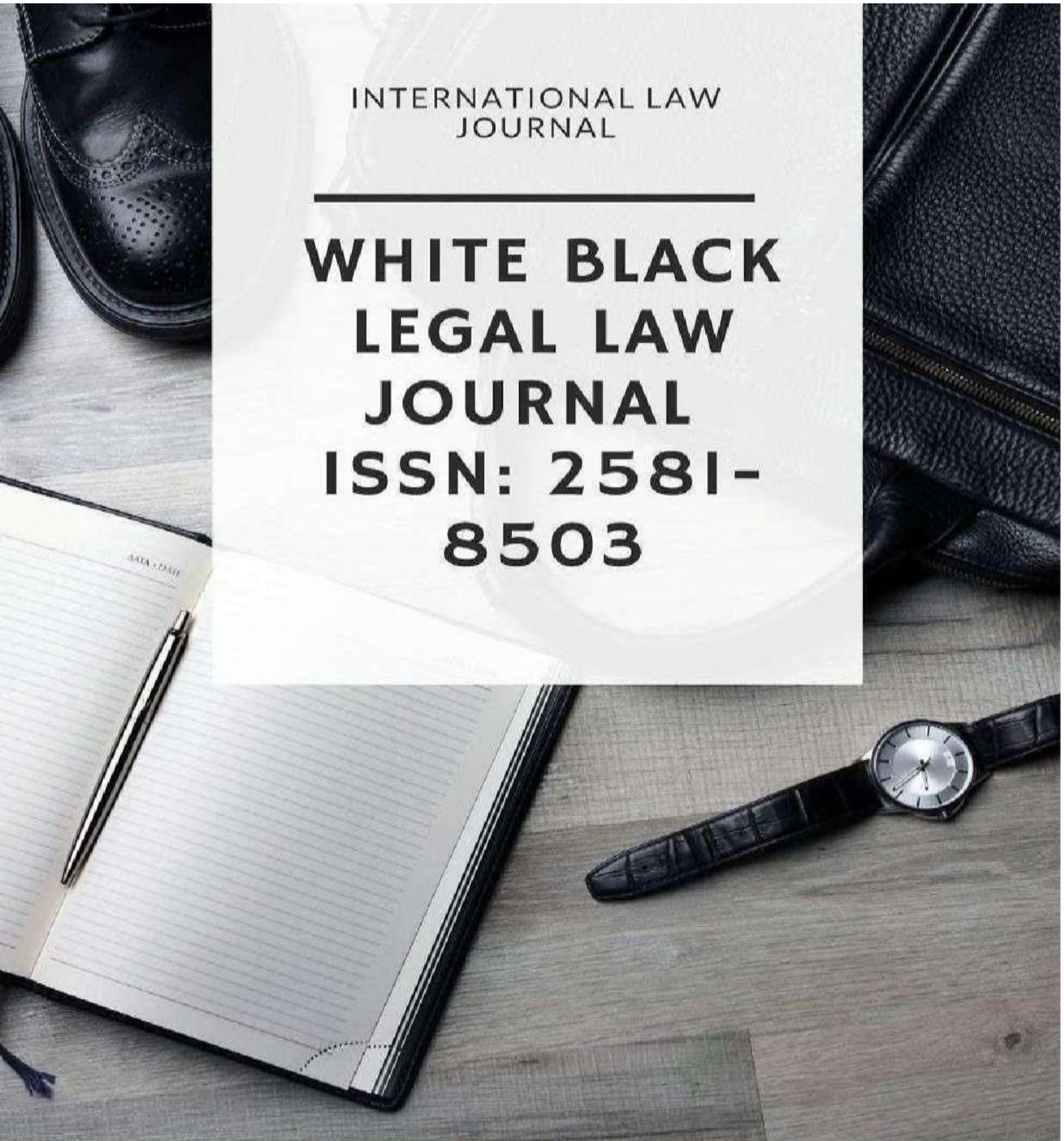




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A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE RIGHT OF CHILDREN TO FREE AND COMPULSORY EDUCATION ACT, 2009

AUTHORED BY - KEVIN JEROME M K

Student of III LL.B, School of Law, VISTAS.

CO-AUTHOR - DR. SINCY WILSON

Assistant Professor and Research supervisor, School of Law, Vistas

ABSTRACT

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 marks a significant constitutional development in India by transforming education from a Directive Principle into a fundamental right under Article 21A. The Act seeks to ensure universal elementary education through provisions relating to free education, infrastructure norms, teacher qualifications and inclusive measures such as reservation for children belonging to economically weaker sections. Despite its progressive framework, questions remain regarding its effectiveness in achieving not only access but also quality education.

This paper critically analyses the implementation and impact of the RTE Act by adopting a doctrinal approach supplemented by secondary data from ASER and UDISE+ reports.. The study highlights that while the Act has been successful in increasing enrolment and improving access to education, it has not been equally effective in enhancing learning outcomes. Persistent challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, shortage of trained teachers, financial constraints, administrative inefficiencies and regional disparities continue to affect its implementation.

The paper further examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on school education and analyses variations across States. It concludes that the Act has achieved partial success and requires structural reforms focusing on flexibility, accountability and quality enhancement.

KEYWORDS

Right to Education, Article 21A, Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, Learning Outcomes, Educational Inequality, Access to Education, Quality of Education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Education plays a central role in shaping social mobility, economic progress and democratic engagement. In a diverse and stratified society such as India, disparities based on caste, class and region make access to education a critical tool for achieving substantive equality. Recognising education as a legal entitlement, therefore, marks an important shift in the constitutional vision of justice.

At the time of independence, the Indian Constitution addressed education under the Directive Principles of State Policy, particularly Article 45, which placed an obligation on the State to strive towards providing free and compulsory education. However, this provision lacked enforceability, resulting in uneven progress across different regions and social groups.

Over time, the judiciary expanded the scope of fundamental rights by interpreting the right to life under Article 21 to include access to education. This interpretive development laid the foundation for constitutional reform, culminating in the insertion of Article 21A through the Constitution (Eighty-Sixth Amendment) Act, 2002. This amendment imposed a binding duty on the State to provide free and compulsory education to children between the ages of six and fourteen.

The judicial recognition of education as a fundamental right was significantly advanced in *Mohini Jain v. State of Karnataka*, where the Supreme Court held that the right to education flows directly from the right to life under Article 21.¹ This position was further refined in *Unni Krishnan v. State of Andhra Pradesh*, where the Court clarified the scope of this right and limited the State's obligation to children up to the age of fourteen.²

The enactment of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 represents the legislative implementation of this constitutional mandate.³ It transforms education from a policy objective into an enforceable right by establishing norms relating to school infrastructure, teacher qualifications, admission procedures and institutional responsibilities.

¹ *Mohini Jain v. State of Karnataka*, (1992) 3 SCC 666.

² *Unni Krishnan v. State of Andhra Pradesh*, (1993) 1 SCC 645.

³ The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, § 3.

Despite its ambitious design, concerns persist regarding the effectiveness of the Act. While access to schooling has improved significantly, questions remain about the quality of education and actual learning outcomes. This paper therefore examines whether the RTE Act has achieved a meaningful balance between access and quality, or whether its impact has remained limited to increasing enrolment.

2. CONSTITUTIONAL AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The evolution of the right to education in India reflects a gradual transition from a non-enforceable directive to a legally protected fundamental right. In its original form, the Constitution addressed education under Article 45 as part of the Directive Principles of State Policy, placing an obligation on the State to strive towards providing free and compulsory education. However, the absence of enforceability resulted in inconsistent implementation across different regions.

A major shift occurred through judicial interpretation, as the Supreme Court expanded the scope of the right to life under Article 21 to include access to education. This interpretation recognised education as essential for the meaningful exercise of other fundamental rights and freedoms.

This position was later refined by limiting the enforceable scope of the right to children up to the age of fourteen, while leaving further educational obligations dependent on the State's economic capacity. This refinement introduced a more structured understanding of the State's responsibilities and created a foundation for legislative action.

The constitutional status of the right to education was firmly established through the Constitution (Eighty-Sixth Amendment) Act, 2002, which inserted Article 21A. This provision imposed a binding obligation on the State to provide free and compulsory education to children between six and fourteen years of age. The amendment also revised Article 45 and introduced Article 51A(k), thereby recognising a shared responsibility between the State and parents.

The constitutional validity of the Act was upheld by the Supreme Court in *Society for Unaided Private Schools v. Union of India*, wherein the Court affirmed the applicability of the Act to private unaided institutions while exempting minority institutions in order to preserve their

constitutional autonomy under Articles 29 and 30.⁴

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 was enacted to give effect to this constitutional mandate. It provides a comprehensive statutory framework governing elementary education and extends its application to both government and private unaided institutions, thereby expanding the scope of regulation.

At the same time, the implementation of the Act required balancing the right to education with other constitutional protections, particularly the rights of minority institutions. Judicial decisions have upheld the validity of the Act while also recognising the need to preserve institutional autonomy in certain contexts.

Overall, the constitutional and legal framework reflects an attempt to balance State responsibility, individual entitlements and institutional freedoms within the broader goal of achieving universal education.

3. KEY PROVISIONS OF THE RTE ACT

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 establishes a detailed framework intended to ensure universal access to elementary education. At its core is the guarantee of free and compulsory education, which shifts the responsibility onto the State not only to provide schooling but also to ensure that children are enrolled, attend regularly and complete their education.

One of the most distinctive features of the Act is the requirement imposed on private unaided schools to allocate a portion of their seats to children from economically weaker sections and disadvantaged groups. This obligation is mandated under Section 12(1)(c) of the RTE Act, 2009, which requires private unaided schools to admit at least twenty-five percent of students from disadvantaged groups.⁵ This measure is designed to promote social inclusion by enabling access to institutions that might otherwise remain inaccessible. However, its implementation has generated practical concerns, particularly in relation to reimbursement mechanisms and institutional compliance.

⁴ Society for Unaided Private Schools v. Union of India, (2012) 6 SCC 1.

⁵ The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, § 12(1)(c).

The Act also introduces prescribed norms and standards relating to school infrastructure, including classroom availability, sanitation facilities, drinking water and other basic requirements. While these standards aim to ensure a minimum level of quality, their rigid application has posed difficulties for certain schools, especially those operating in space-constrained urban environments.

Teacher-related provisions form another important component of the Act. The qualifications and appointment of teachers are regulated under Section 23 of the RTE Act, 2009.⁶ It mandates minimum qualifications and assigns specific responsibilities to teachers in order to improve accountability within the education system. Despite these requirements, the shortage of adequately trained teachers and uneven quality of training continue to limit the effectiveness of these provisions in practice.

An additional feature of the Act was the introduction of the no-detention policy, which sought to reduce dropout rates by preventing students from being held back in the early years of schooling. Although the policy was intended to create a less stressful learning environment, it faced criticism for potentially weakening academic standards, leading to subsequent modifications.

The Act also seeks to make the admission process more equitable by prohibiting capitation fees and screening procedures. This provision is aimed at preventing discriminatory practices and ensuring that access to education is not determined by economic or social background.

Taken together, these provisions demonstrate that the Act goes beyond mere access by attempting to address issues of inclusion, quality and fairness. However, the effectiveness of these measures ultimately depends on how they are implemented in practice.

4. IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

Despite its comprehensive design, the implementation of the RTE Act reveals a persistent gap between formal enrolment and actual learning. While access to schooling has expanded significantly, a substantial number of students continue to struggle with basic literacy and numeracy, indicating that increased participation has not translated into meaningful educational

⁶ The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, § 23.

outcomes.

Empirical evidence from the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) consistently highlights that a significant proportion of students in elementary schools are unable to read grade-appropriate texts or perform basic arithmetic, indicating a gap between enrolment and actual learning.⁷

Infrastructure remains a critical concern, particularly in rural and under-resourced areas. Although many schools formally meet prescribed norms on paper, the actual condition and usability of facilities such as toilets, drinking water and classrooms often fall short. In urban areas, compliance with land and space requirements presents a different set of challenges, especially for older institutions operating within limited physical constraints.

The shortage of qualified teachers continues to undermine the effectiveness of the Act. In many schools, teachers are required to manage multiple grade levels simultaneously or are burdened with administrative responsibilities, which reduces the time and attention available for classroom instruction. Variations in the quality of teacher training across different States further contribute to inconsistent learning outcomes.

Financial limitations and administrative inefficiencies also affect implementation. Delays in the disbursement of funds, particularly reimbursements to private schools under the reservation policy, create operational difficulties and reduce institutional willingness to fully comply with the Act. Differences in fiscal capacity across States further result in uneven implementation.

The disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic exposed and intensified existing structural weaknesses. The shift to digital modes of education highlighted significant disparities in access to technology, with many students lacking devices or reliable internet connectivity. This led to learning loss, reduced engagement and an increased risk of dropouts, particularly among vulnerable groups. Reports during the pandemic period also indicate significant learning loss and widening digital divides among students.⁸

⁷ Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), Annual Status of Education Report (Latest Edition).

⁸ Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), COVID Wave Reports (2020–2022).

These challenges indicate that while the legal framework of the RTE Act is well-defined, its effectiveness is constrained by systemic issues that require sustained policy attention and institutional reform.

5. COMPARATIVE STATE ANALYSIS

The implementation of the RTE Act shows considerable variation across different States in India. These differences highlight the role of governance, resource allocation and administrative efficiency in determining the effectiveness of the Act. As a result, the outcomes of the Act are not uniform and depend largely on local conditions.

Kerala is often regarded as a leading example in the field of education due to its well-developed infrastructure, high literacy rates and consistent policy focus on public education. The State has been relatively successful in ensuring better learning outcomes and lower dropout rates. This indicates that strong institutional capacity and sustained investment play a crucial role in achieving the objectives of the Act. This performance is supported by reports and data, which indicates higher retention rates and better pupil-teacher ratios in the State.⁹

Tamil Nadu also demonstrates comparatively better performance, supported by welfare measures such as the mid-day meal scheme and improved access to school infrastructure. These initiatives have contributed to higher enrolment and retention rates. However, issues such as delays in reimbursement under the reservation scheme and certain administrative inefficiencies continue to affect implementation.

In contrast, States such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh face significant challenges in implementing the Act effectively. Problems relating to inadequate infrastructure, shortage of teachers and high pupil-teacher ratios continue to affect the quality of education.¹⁰ Many schools in these States struggle to meet even the basic requirements prescribed under the Act.

These inter-State differences demonstrate that the success of the RTE Act is not determined solely by its legal framework. Instead, factors such as governance quality, financial capacity and administrative efficiency play a decisive role. Therefore, improving implementation

⁹ Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+), UDISE+ Report 2022–23, Ministry of Education, Government of India.

¹⁰ Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), Foundational Learning Data.

requires not only legal reforms but also stronger institutional mechanisms at the State level.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 represents a major step in recognising education as a fundamental right in India. It has significantly improved access to schooling and strengthened the legal framework governing elementary education. However, the objective of providing quality education remains only partially achieved, as challenges relating to learning outcomes, infrastructure, teacher availability and administrative efficiency continue to persist.

In order to enhance the effectiveness of the Act, greater emphasis must be placed on improving learning outcomes. The success of education should not be measured only in terms of enrolment, but also by the ability of students to read, write and perform basic arithmetic. Schools should adopt regular assessment mechanisms that ensure accountability without creating unnecessary pressure on children. Students who perform poorly should be provided with remedial teaching and additional support.

Infrastructure requirements under the Act should be implemented in a more flexible and practical manner. Many existing schools, particularly in metropolitan areas, face genuine constraints in meeting rigid norms relating to land and playgrounds. Greater importance should therefore be given to learning outcomes, safety standards and quality of teaching rather than strict technical compliance. Separate and context-specific norms may be considered for urban, rural and pre-existing institutions.

Improving the quality of teachers is essential for achieving the objectives of the Act. There is a need for better recruitment, continuous training and capacity building. Programmes such as the Diploma in Elementary Education (D.El.Ed) through NIOS may be expanded to enable untrained teachers to acquire necessary qualifications. In addition, teachers should be trained in modern teaching methods that focus on conceptual understanding rather than rote learning. Timely funding and efficient utilisation of resources are equally important. Delays in reimbursement to private schools under the reservation scheme have created practical difficulties and affected implementation. A uniform and transparent method for determining the per-child cost may reduce disputes and improve efficiency and an universal formula

throughout the country should be prepared and published as GO by the Ministry of education, Government of India. Strengthening monitoring mechanisms is also necessary to ensure that schools are not only compliant with statutory requirements but are also delivering meaningful education.

The provisions relating to reservation for economically weaker sections and the no detention policy should be implemented in a balanced manner. While these measures promote inclusion and reduce dropout rates, they must be supported by proper systems such as simplified admission procedures, awareness among parents and remedial education for students. A balanced approach is required to ensure both access and academic standards.

Further, greater attention should be given to supporting economically weaker families through direct benefit mechanisms. Providing financial assistance directly to parents, through schemes such as Vouchers or Direct Benefit Transfers, may reduce administrative delays and improve access to education. Such measures can also enhance participation and retention, particularly among disadvantaged groups.

In conclusion, the Right to Education Act has made substantial progress in expanding access to education in India. However, its long-term success depends on shifting the focus from mere enrolment to quality learning, strengthening institutional capacity and ensuring effective implementation. Continuous reform and policy adaptation are essential to fully realise the constitutional vision of education as a fundamental right.

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