Comparative Education Society of India (CESI)

15th Annual International Conference

Conference Theme

Education, Public Sphere and Democracy: Exploring Trajectories and Possibilities

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Abstract submission date: 15 September, 2025

Organized By

Institute of Home Economics | Gargi College | Miranda House

University of Delhi

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CALL FOR PAPERS

Comparative Education Society of India (CESI)

15th Annual International Conference, 2025

Education, Public Sphere and Democracy: Exploring Trajectories and Possibilities

Democracy is the construction of a public life in which everyone can take part. This inextricably ties the public sphere to the idea of democracy and enlightenment values, as it makes the public use of critical reason possible. This also necessitates beginning with education that not only supports this public life, but also creates the ground to reinvent it. Habermas argued that democracies do not just need technology and knowledge, but also depend on proper reconstruction and criticism of their tradition. Without a vibrant education system, democracy becomes a mere formal process without substantive realization of its aims. These threads holding public sphere, education and democracy together have emerged as a point of investigation and exploration, specifically in the present context where capitalism has moved from welfare state to neoliberalism to late capitalism. Scholars have been arguing that education policy and curriculum are becoming insulated from the public discourse and are serving the interests of the private institutions or the state. Nussbaum asks, "what education should we teach to the young in a democratic society?", pointing to the antagonism between education for economic growth and education for democracy. Issues like privatization of education, and the role of education in the age of social media, artificial intelligence and general dominance of technology, identity politics, post-truth, cancel culture, citizenship, social movements are all part of the questions that are posed to education in the backdrop of this tension of creating a public sphere. Therefore, the theme of the 15th Annual International Conference of Comparative Education Society of India (CESI), 2025 has been titled "Education, Public Sphere and Democracy: Exploring Trajectories and Possibilities" to encourage scholars to offer their perspectives and evidence, which may help us foster new imaginations and policy.

If public is a common place, which is accessible to everyone, a meeting point, then its fragmentation indicates the collapse of public and private into each other. Values that structure democracies in this context are of competing self-interest, emanating from particular identities. The "eclipse of the public", as Dewey had called this fragmentation, has been there since its inception, however this predicament is at an inflection point today. The word public not only

has its roots in the tension that state shares with the individual and civil society, but is also internally tied to the relationship that citizens share with the state. Habermas traced how meanings of words like public, publicity and public opinion have undergone significant changes with the shifting social and political conditions. For instance, over time, publicity has lost its critical function and is reduced to staged display. If the public refers to social life that contributes to political decision-making processes, then it also alludes to the decision-making processes, which otherwise may seem private, but mediate between the citizen and the state. The public can be the population living in the cities, and the services provided to this population are referred as public goods, for instance, education. When understood as institutions supported by the state, which can include public schools, universities/colleges, hospitals etc., public sphere comes under the purview of the state or alternatively is part of the civil society, but with a concomitant public function. In this way, education, on one side, is part of this mediating set of institutions, but on the other side, is expected to play a meta role in giving form to the public sphere itself. While education was always tied to the task of nation-building and modernity, it is through public use of reason that education held within itself a promise to question the state and to uphold the enlightenment values, which are rooted in universality instead of being dependent on particularistic identities emerging from social groups, political ideologies, religion, caste or race. If education through universal values promised a sphere, separate from market and the state, for ideas to be discussed and debated, then institutions like schools, colleges and universities are located on this promise of democracy. Education policy, curriculum, content, textbook, and access to education are all the aspects that weld public sphere with education. The word public, hence, already holds many tensions and contradictions on which the discourse of education is structured.

Public sphere's link to politics and citizenship also refers to the literary sphere—literary journals, periodicals, and the institutions where members of the public critically discuss art and literature. It has been shown that the political public sphere is born out of the literary sphere, however the relationship between truth, aesthetics and public sphere is not straight forward and is getting increasingly complex with the prevalence of social media. Habermas claimed that the public sphere played the role of critical rationality, but the role of aesthetics and its relationship to reason remain an open question. The relationship between aesthetics and the public sphere raises important questions—is public sphere only in service of truth or certain aesthetic experience becomes necessary for sharing a common world? If the latter is true, then

what should we teach to children and how should we teach them such that aesthetic experience is shared with them?

Since the public sphere holds within itself the threat of populism, political theorists like Hegel found the state necessary to counter the plurality of the public sphere. Marx showed the ideological function of the public sphere, as he argued that both the constitutional state and the public opinion were ideological tools used in the exploitation of the proletariat. The emphasis on public sphere moved between the civil society and the state in the writings of different thinkers—Hobbes and Hegel were more conservative and argued for a dominant role of the state, while Habermas and Arendt affirmed the role of public sphere in the modern society, which for them, is possible through an affirmation of speech and action, instead of reason and rationality.

Habermas who was one of the foremost defenders of the idea of public sphere acknowledged that public sphere as it existed in the 18th century America constituted of a relatively small number of males who are educated and property-owning heads of family. This meant the exclusion of women, working class, racial minorities and in today's context the list of exclusion would include religion, caste, LGBTQIA+ etc. Fraser has argued that there was not ever a single uniform public sphere but rather parallel and oppositional "counterpublics" which struggled against dominant power structures. Hence, public sphere was never a place where we could rise above self-interests, and instead been a space where a claim on public could be made from the self-interest of a group itself. What should be the relationship between counterpublics and education is never exactly clear—can education speak from the interests of a particular group, or a normative conception of public sphere is presupposed in educational practice?

In the global south the unified and rational public sphere, even in the normative sense of Habermas, was never fully realized. Governmentality in South Asia is closely attached to informality where the counterpublics drive public discourse. Citizenship, especially for urban poor is less dependent on formal institutions, and rather functions through informal systems and negotiations of claims, protests and leveraging community identity. Religion and the political intertwine and often question the liberal conceptions of citizenship and democracy. Moreover, public sphere assume individual as the center of its formation, whereas in countries like India, family and community remain important, often playing a prominent role in the formation of the public sphere. Scholars have been arguing that in India the challenges posed by privatisation and commercialisation has fragmented the education system and the debates

on low learning levels of children and the sharp divide between the education for the rich and the poor poses important questions for public sphere. Can there be a public sphere common between the rich and poor with such sharp inequalities, and if not, what effect will this have on our democratic practices? Can the poor have their politics and if yes then what forms is it taking, or precarity and struggle for survival reduces poor's capacity to participate in the political sphere? In what ways informality and precarious work is shaping our democratic practices and what impact they have on education are questions that we would need to collectively deliberate upon.

We invite submissions from academics, researchers, practitioners, think-tanks, teacher educators, teachers and members of various grassroots organizations, civic and policy circles to submit their abstracts for CESI 2025 for the following sub themes.

Sub themes

- State, market and civil society: Contradictions, linkages and partnerships
- Higher education and democracy
- Early childhood education in educational context
- Decoloniality, globalisation and internationalisation
- Comparative research methods in education
- Global and local influences on curriculum, pedagogy and classrooms
- Role of teachers, teaching and teacher education
- Histories of education development in the global south
- Identities, education and power
- Language, arts and culture in education
- Education technology, artificial intelligence and digital social inequality
- Education, nation-states and the margins
- Education, sustainability and the urban
- Education, citizenship and resistance
- The political economy of education
- Financing and management of education
- Climate change and Education

- Policy reforms, policy frameworks, and policy borrowing
- Educational philosophies and sustainable futures
- Philosophical foundations of educational systems
- Integrating ethics into educational practice
- Gendered negotiations and navigation of the educational landscape
- State, market and regulatory frameworks of education
- Stratification, hierarchies and inequalities in education
- Multilingual classrooms in global south context
- Language, identity and power
- Critical pedagogy in language classroom
- Constructivist approach to science education
- Science literacy and curriculum reforms
- Authority, autonomy and dialogue in teaching
- Political philosophy of education
- Technology and future of education
- Epistemology of mathematics
- Teaching and learning of mathematics
- Debates on foundational literacy and numeracy
- Curriculum, reforms and policy

Host Institutions

Institute of Home Economics (IHE), Miranda House (MH), and Gargi College (GC), University of Delhi.

Venue

Miranda House, University of Delhi.

Important Dates

Last Date for Submission of the Abstract: 15th September 2025

Decision on the Abstract: 15th October 2025

Abstract Submission Guidelines

- Abstract word limit should be between 500-700 words.
- Abstracts are to be submitted to the respective Research Interest Groups (RIGs) of CESI.
- In case your abstract does not align with any of the specified RIGs, please select the "Other" category during the submission process.
- Abstracts beyond the dedicated sub themes are also acceptable.
- Only for proposed panels, a single document (brief note on the panel theme as well as individual abstracts of the panelists) to be submitted to the respective RIG the panel theme is aligned with.
- Abstracts submissions to be made only through the abstract link to be uploaded on the CESI website: http://www.cesindia.net
- Any submission of abstract over emails will not be accepted.

Contact:

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