



SCHOOL EDUCATION IN INDIA: PROBLEMS AND POLICY MEASURES

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Abstract

School education is central to human and socio-economic development, yet India continues to face persistent challenges in ensuring equitable and quality schooling. This paper examines the major structural problems confronting school education in India, including limited access for marginalized groups, high dropout rates, qualitative deficiencies, socio-economic and gender-based discrimination, and inadequate public financing. Drawing on secondary data and policy documents, the study highlights the gap between increased enrolment and actual learning outcomes. It further reviews key policy initiatives such as the Right to Education Act, Samagra Shiksha, the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, digital education platforms, and the National Education Policy 2020. The paper argues that while recent reforms are comprehensive and progressive, their effectiveness depends on adequate funding, institutional capacity, and effective implementation. Achieving universal and quality education requires sustained policy commitment beyond mere expansion of enrolment.

Keywords: Educational Access, Quality of Education, Right to Education Act, NEP 2020

1. Introduction

Education is the mightiest and the most dependable tool for bringing in major transformations in an individual's mentality and sense of judgment which in turn enables him to make positive societal changes. Historical evidences around the world confirm that education is the only mediator through which the social, spiritual, political and economic changes that we see around us are made possible.

Policy makers should realize that apart from aiding "material and psychological" development, education has spillover effects which ease individual's access to better avenues of life and further lead to the elimination of social illnesses such as inequality and poverty. Coming ahead, it is important for an individual to be educated not only in order to be aware and claim benefits of his other civil, political, economic and social rights but also to earn a livelihood (food, shelter and clothes) which in recent past has led to its recognition as a fundamental right (Right to Education Act, 2009).

No doubt that 'Elementary Education' is the most pivotal part when one begins his journey of gaining formal education but the need of the hour in our country suggests that everyone be provided education minimum till 18 year of age as attainment of high levels of education has always been a matter of great concern in India. Hence, in light of the importance that education accords in bringing major social transformation, the government in 2009 announced "Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act" for the children in the age group of 6-14 years and now recently has adopted the New Education Policy which replaces the 34 year old National Policy on Education, 1986. This Paper will try to analyze the challenges present in school education in India and will also through light on the major government initiatives. I will divide this paper into three parts where in the 1st part I will discuss the major issues in school education and then in the next section that is Section 2 a brief about the leading government schemes for school education will be provided. And in Section 3, I will conclude the paper.

2. Challenges

International comparison shows us that India lags behind the countries equally placed in terms of economic wellbeing. Like if we compare the Mean Years of Schooling than the HDR 2019 shows that for India it is 6.5 years while for China it is 7.9



years. India's neighboring countries like Sri Lanka also fairs far better on this indicator (Sri Lanka's Mean year of schooling is 11.1 years). So there is a need to understand the problems faced by School Education in India.

This section highlights some of the major systemic problems which even after 70 years of independence still haunt the Indian education system.

Accessibility

As per the 1951 Census only 27% men and 9% women were literate. The policy makers set a goal of achieving full access to Free and Compulsory Education for all in the age group 6-14 by 1960. But it is only after RTE Act, 2009 that this goal is nearly achieved. Even after achieving high 'Gross Enrollment Ratio' (94.9 and 77 % for Class I-VIII and I-XII respectively), the question that still remains unanswered is 'Why a large section of children especially from minority and marginalized groups remains devoid of school education.' GER as given by different agencies is mostly overstated due to political concerns and to reinforce its claim of rapid expansion of education and making it accessible to all. To avoid such discrepancies and know the real state of education in India, the most appropriate measure is to use attendance and drop-out rates post the enrollment of children. It is estimated that the former is no less than 25% below the enrollment rates and for several-economic reasons the drop-out rates has consistently been intolerably high (18% at Secondary Level in 2013-14). Hence, the figures reveal that despite many children getting enrolled, only a few of them are able to continue their studies.

Qualitative constraints

Despite stern efforts, the quality of India school education has tremendously deteriorated in the recent past. One reason can be the High Pupil Teacher Ratio. As per the Human Development Report 2019, the Pupil Teacher Ratio at primary level in India is 35 compared to 17 in China and 23 in Sri Lanka. No standard criterion for recruitment of teachers at each level of school also leads poor quality. The commonly held view is that poor funding has played a major rule behind this and therefore, all the quality constraints will disappear as soon as adequate funds are made available for the education sector. Also it is believed that laying down uniform 'norms and standards' and monitoring their proper implementation from time to time is a good instrument of maintaining quality standards. Though, few norms have also been mentioned in RTE Act but the fact that these are applied according to government's desire renders them unjustifiable in the court of law and hence, they are absolutely ineffective in bringing suitable qualitative changes. All in all, quality is a pointless discussion when the 'legally' enforceable norms are not in place.

Discrimination

There is no doubt that the access to better quality education (private schools) is restricted primarily to the children having rich background, whereas, those belonging to poor and marginalized groups have no option but to go to the government schools which are presently in an disappointing state, hence, economic disparities perpetuate discrimination in the school education as well. This can be seen from the fact that at primary level only 19.6% students belong to Scheduled Castes and mere 10.6% to Scheduled Tribes (U-DISE 2016-17 data). Also there is gender discrimination in access to education. As per the Census 2011 the literacy rate for male was 82.1% while for female it was 65.4%. Two major ways in which the government could have considerably reduced this discrimination include: applying strict norms in both private and public schools and introducing the idea of neighborhood schools. However, the advocates of freedom of choice and expression have prevented the latter idea from coming into practice by citing it as a violation of their fundamental rights.

Financial Barriers

It is important to note that underfunding in education might be a result of fiscal concerns and therefore, public-private partnership is invited for raising the level of investment but even this has failed to make any significant impact since



government has not been able to provide any motivation to the private institutions for helping the former to achieve its aim. CABE report suggested that funds for education has been raised (from 10th to 11th Five Year Plan) to only 3,00,000 million annually against the estimated annual requirement of 7,30,000 million. India spent 3.1% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2019-20 on education (Economic Survey, 2019-20) compared to 10% spent by many countries across the world. This is despite the fact that mostly all committees on Education since 1970s have recommended that the amount should be increased to at least 6% of GDP. Now when education has been identified as a fundamental right, it has become legally mandatory for the state to provide free and compulsory to every child in the age group 6 to 14 years even in the absence of any financial aid from the private sector and hence, it is now binding on government to raise its level of expenditure on education to make a step forward in achieving universalization of education.

3. Policy Measures

After going through the above challenges it is clear that School Education in India is in a bad state. But the efforts made by government and NGOs in the recent past shows that School Education has received significant attention and in future the improvement in this sector is hoped to be impressive. Let us have a look at some of the major policy initiatives:

First, one of the most important initiatives is *Samagara Shiksha*. It came into effect from 2018-19. It's an umbrella scheme which subsumes Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) and Teacher Education. The aim of Samagara Shiksha Scheme is to ensure equitable and inclusive education in consonance with Sustainable Development Goal 4 and RTE Act. It extends from pre-school to higher secondary level. It encapsulates grants related to infrastructure improvement, Swachhata Abhiyan, Teacher Training etc. The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan which is now under Samagara Shiksha, literally means 'Mission for Universal Education'. It was started to achieve the goals for elementary education set in the RTE Act,2009. It provided financial assistance to State government and UTs to improve the quality of schools and to enroll the out of the school children. It was active till 2017-18 after that it is subsumed under Samagara Shiksha.

Second, *Mid-Day-Meal Scheme* is government's flagship feeding program in schools. It was launched in 1995 and by now it has become the largest school meal program in the world. It provides cooked Mid-Day Meal to students of Class I to Class VIII who attends school. It directly tries to address the problem of malnutrition and hunger and indirectly contributes to reduce caste based discrimination by socializing students of different castes. This scheme also provides an incentive to students from underprivileged background to attend school and in this way it also increases attendance and enrolment in schools. It is applicable to all government schools, aided schools and other institutions that were supported under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. Government is planning to extend this program to all students up to Class XII. A pilot project is also going on in which fortified rice is provided to increase the nutritional level of students.

Third, *Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan* is the mainly oriented towards secondary schools. It was launched in 2009 with an aim to improve the access to Secondary schools (Class IX – XII) by opening new schools within some rational distance to each and every home. It subsumes the 'Information and Communication Technology in Schools' which basically provides equal access to digital resources to all students irrespective of their socio-economic background. It provides for setting up of laboratories, in service training of teachers to improve the quality of education.

Fourth, Government has started many Digital Initiatives. One of them is DIKSHA which stands for Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing Platform. Though it was launched in 2017 but in recent year its utility increased manifold. In the COVID times digital education has become the new mode of teaching and at this juncture DIKSHA platform has played a vital role. It provides access to digital content for almost all classes for different boards and in different languages along with training modules for teachers. Other digital content provider platform like e-pathsala is also integrated with this for smooth access. Another initiative is National Digital Library which provides one stop access to education content for almost all levels and for more or less all domains. Approximately 2.5 crores digital content is available on this platform. One more



initiative is SWAYAM i.e. Study Webs of Active Learning for Young Aspiring Minds. It provides courses from IX to XII to Post Graduate level. NCERT is developing courses on 12 subjects for IX to XII class. All these have helped students and teachers to continue the teaching learning process even in the pandemic times.

Fifth, *New Education Policy (NEP)* is the most recent landmark initiative of Government of India. It aims to truly achieve the targets set by the Sustainable Development Goal 4 i.e. "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" by 2030. It includes provision for providing universal access for children in the age group 3-6 years though the Anganwadis and Pre-Schools. Hitherto, this age group was not considered for policy formation. It also has provision of 'National Mission on Foundational Literacy and Numeracy' to address the poor learning outcome problem. This NEP provides for expansion of Open and Distance Learning Program of NIOS with main focus on Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) to lower the dropout rates. It requires the SCERTs to set up 'School Quality Assessment and Accreditation Framework' for maintaining uniform standard. To ensure the quality of teachers it provides for 'National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education' and 'Teacher Eligibility Tests' for teachers of all levels. To reduce the discrimination on caste and gender basis, fee waiver and scholarships will be provided to SEDG students and setting up of Gender Inclusion Fund for female and transgender students.

It includes provision for instruction in mother tongue/home language up to Class V and if possible up to VIII so that student not well versed in English language don't lag behind. For student assessment, Class X and XII board exams will be restructured and National Assessment Centre, PARAKH (Performance Assessment, Review and Analysis of Knowledge for Holistic Development) will be established. For making education productive the school curriculum will be changed to '5+3+3+4' from the current 10+2 system. Contemporary subjects like Artificial Intelligence will be introduced and the rigid separation into 'Humanities', 'Science' and 'Commerce' will be abolished to give freedom in choosing subjects to students. To tackle the issue of shortage of finances, States and Centre will target to spend 6% of GDP on education. It also aims to achieve 100% adult literacy. Vocational studies and skill education to be introduced at school level to increase the employability of students. This New Education Policy is very ambitious and progressive and has the capacity to make our education system among the bests in the world. How it will be implemented will determine its results.

4. Conclusion

Even after having so many dedicated initiatives for improving condition of school education problems still persist. Apart from the presence of systemic roadblocks, the inherent faults in the formation of RTE Act such as substitution of the wider concept of education by the functional notion literacy and many other problems have played a crucial role in restricting the expansion of educational facilities. The focus should not only be on increasing enrolment rates but also on improving other aspects such as maintenance of adequate teaching staff, school buildings and sophisticated training institutions, all of which has been more or less given due importance in the New Education Policy,2020 and in other schemes. Last but not the least, when talking in terms of Indian context one should always remember that our country constitutes of students from diverse cultural, economical, social and political backgrounds having sharp mental differences which makes it extremely difficult to educate them under one roof and eliminate inequality, poverty and class-conflicts. Hence, despite the challenges outlined above the various government acts and schemes should work in combination with each other to make the prospects for universalization of quality education a reality in a country like India. One should understand the fact that only introduction of various schemes will not help us achieve the goals, it is equally important to fill-in gaps and monitor their smooth implementation.

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