

Secondary Education in India: Issues and Concerns

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Abstract: Secondary education serves as a link between the elementary and higher education, and plays a very important role in this respect. A child's future can depend a lot on the type of education she/he receives at the secondary level. Apart from grounding the roots of education of a child, secondary education can be instrumental in shaping and directing the child to a bright future. This stage of education serves to move on higher secondary stage as well as to provide generic competencies that cut across various domains of knowledge as well as skills. The recent significant development of society, impact of globalisation and rapid growth of new technologies have led to reassessment of India's preparedness to generate required technical manpower, develop new knowledge and skills, and remain competitive at global level.

Since free and compulsory education to all children up to the age fourteen is the Constitutional commitment in India, all efforts in the past were focused on achieving the goal of universal elementary education. It is upper primary and secondary level of education that is now in the focus. Over time, secondary schooling facilities improved to a significant level but still there are a few areas of concern like Schooling facilities to a large number of habitations were not available. Government schools had lower percentage of buildings than the schools under the private managements. So far as the investment on education is considered, secondary education has never been the priority area of investment. In order to meet the challenge of Universalisation of Secondary Education, there is a need for a paradigm shift in the conceptual design of secondary education. The guiding principles in this regard are; Universal Access, Equality and Social Justice, Relevance and Development and Curricular and Structural Aspects. Universalisation of Secondary Education gives opportunity, to move towards equity. The concept of 'common school' will be encouraged. If these values are to be established in the system, all types of schools, including unaided private schools will also contribute towards Universalisation of Secondary Education by ensuring adequate enrolments for the children from under privileged society and the children Below Poverty Line families.

Keywords: Secondary education, Constitutional commitment in India, ensuring adequate enrolments.

1. INTRODUCTION

Secondary education serves as a link between the elementary and higher education, and plays a very important role in this respect. A child's future can depend a lot on the type of education she/he receives at the secondary level. Apart from grounding the roots of education of a child, secondary education can be instrumental in shaping and directing the child to a bright future. This stage of education serves to move on higher secondary stage as well as to provide generic competencies that cut across various domains of knowledge as well as skills. The recent significant development of society, impact of globalisation and rapid growth of new technologies have led to reassessment of India's preparedness to generate required technical manpower, develop new knowledge and skills, and remain competitive at global level.

2. STRUCTURE OF SECONDARY EDUCATION

Secondary education is a crucial stage in the educational hierarchy as it prepares the young person's for higher education and also for the world of work. The Government of India's intervention in secondary education is at two levels: (i) through apex national level bodies like National Council of Educational Research and Training, Central Board of

Secondary Education, National Institute of Open Schooling, Navodaya Vidyalaya Samiti, Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan and Central Tibetan School Administration and (ii) Through centrally sponsored schemes, such as (a) Scheme of Boarding and Hostel facilities for Girl students of secondary and higher secondary schools, (b) Integrated Education for Disabled children, (c) Information and Communication Technology in schools, and (d) Quality Improvement in Schools.

➤ The Scheme of Boarding and Hostel Facilities for Girl students of secondary and Higher Secondary schools provides for financial assistance to voluntary organizations for running hostels for girl students of secondary and higher secondary schools. Preference is given to organizations having hostels in Educationally Backward Districts, particularly those which are predominantly inhabited by SCs and STs and educationally backward minorities.

➤ The Scheme of Integrated Education for Disabled Children aims to integrate children and youth with moderate disabilities in the normal school system. The Scheme provides 100% financial assistance to State/UT governments and NGOs under various components for the education of children suffering from mild to moderate disabilities in normal schools. The components include allowances for books and stationary, uniform, transport, escort, readers for blind children, equipment etc, and salary of teachers recruited for teaching the disabled children.

➤ The Scheme of Information and Communication Technology (ICT@ schools) was launched by merging the erstwhile schemes of Educational Technology and Computer Literacy and Studies in schools, which works as a window of opportunity to the learners in the schools of India to bridge the digital divide.

➤ Quality Improvement in Schools is a centrally sponsored scheme and is an amalgamation of the schemes of improvement in science education, Mathematics Olympiads, Environmental Orientation, Promotion of Yoga and Population education and has a new component of Educational Libraries. Under this scheme, State governments and registered societies are given grants for the specified activities under each of the erstwhile programme.

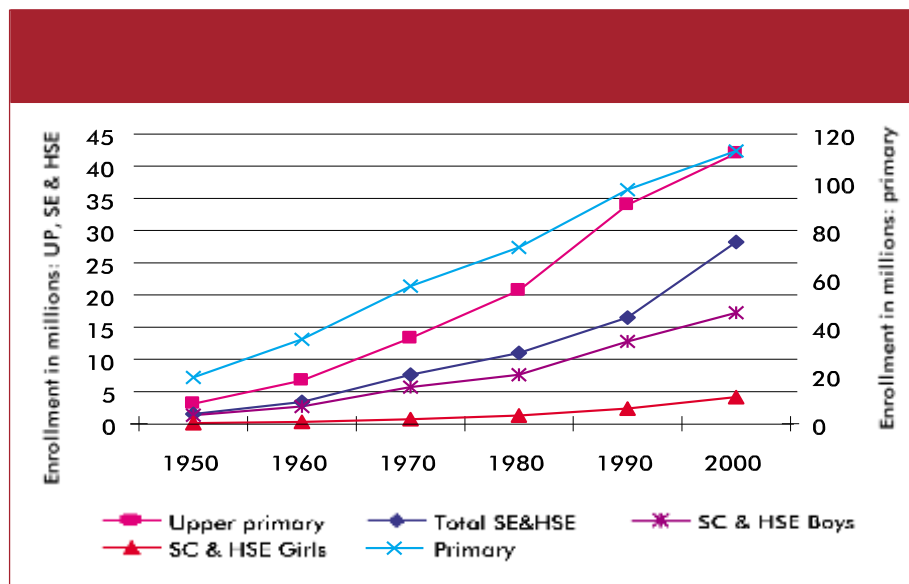
➤ In order to provide for diversification of educational opportunities so as to enhance individual employability, reduce the mismatch between demand and supply of skilled manpower and provide an alternative for those pursuing higher education, the centrally sponsored scheme of Vocationalisation of secondary education was launched in 1988. It was revised in 1992-93 and now provides for financial assistance to the States to set up an administrative structure, conduct area-specific vocational surveys, prepare curricula, textbooks, workbooks, curriculum guides, training manuals, teachers training programmes,

Secondary is divided into two stages, lower or junior secondary and senior or higher secondary. Secondary education is varied and depends on whether States have adopted the national structure for elementary education of eight years duration. Excluding the Union Territories, about nine States continue to have seven years of elementary education, making secondary three years rather than two as in the other States. It is clear that States with a three-year secondary education program are in transition and will adopt the national structure in the next few years. In general, there are no subject choices to be made by students in secondary education; the curriculum is standardized depending on the certification process.

3. SECONDARY EDUCATION IN INDIA: ISSUES AND CONCERNS

➤ There are 28 million students enrolled in secondary and higher secondary education in the country representing a Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of 35 percent. Two thirds of those students enrolled in upper primary and a fourth of those enrolled in primary continue on into secondary. The median growth rate in secondary (6.45) is higher than in upper primary (5.61) and primary (3.95). Though the rate of increase in secondary is higher than in upper primary and primary, the recent increase in primary enrolment is not reflected yet in the enrolment in upper primary and secondary education. It is likely that this increase will take place over the next few years, which has both policy and financial implications discussed later in the paper. In terms of the proportion of boys to girls over the last few decades, enrolment has improved from 13 percent to 38 percent. However, the GERs reflect a continued gender gap for boys and girls. The GER for boys is 42 percent and that for girls, 28 percent. Net Enrolment Ratios are not available. If the increase in enrolment is considered over the last 50 years, except during the last decade, enrolment appears to have almost doubled each decade. In the last ten years, enrolment has increased by about 30 percent. During this period, girls' enrolment has increased more than that of boys — 55 times for girls and 13 times for boys. However, the gap between boys and girls' enrolment continues to be large.

Table 1. Comparative enrolment across levels of Education



Selected Educational Statistics (different years)

➤ Certain populations in India have traditionally been disadvantaged and these communities are officially referred to as Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). The proportion of SC and ST students is much less than their share of the population. In 1999, SC enrolment represented seven percent of the total enrolment in secondary, whereas their share in the population is 14 percent. The situation was worse in senior secondary where only two percent were enrolled. Similarly with the ST community, which constitutes about eight percent of the population, 2.6 percent of the students were enrolled in secondary and 0.8 percent in senior secondary. Within these groups, the small percentage share of girls' enrolment is also a concern. The low representation of SC and ST students in SE does highlight the issue of equity that needs to be addressed. SE students among the minority population are also low. Taking economic levels into consideration, only 20 percent of students from the lowest income quintile are enrolled in SE (World Bank 2002). Thus caste and income inequity in secondary education will need to be addressed.

➤ Three types of institutions - private, aided and government schools, capture overall enrolment in SE. Government schools are fully financed by either Central or State governments and in States managed by either government or local bodies. In most government schools, the medium of instruction is the State language with English as a second language. Aided schools are managed privately by individuals, trusts, societies or corporate bodies but funded largely by government. The government is responsible for the entire recurring costs for these schools while the management is responsible, fully or partially, for the physical facilities and administration. The medium of instruction could be English or the local language. The aided schools are an important way in which the government makes use of the private sector to provide education. The private schools are mainly English medium and managed and financed privately. The question of the number of schools that fall into each of these categories within States has considerable implications for the financing and administration of secondary education.

➤ The recent analysis of the rates of returns to education in India suggests the positive effects of expanding this sector. Working secondary school graduates earned salaries 2.9 times higher than that of illiterate workers and 1.7 times that of workers with primary school education. The benefits were higher for female workers with secondary education. The private rate of return for females with secondary education was 50 percent and for males 14 percent; the public rate of return was 13 and 40 percent respectively (World Bank, 2002).

➤ While IT and vocational areas are critical, especially within the Indian context with its high rate of poverty, the development of lifelong learning skills that support a knowledge economy is also critical. The knowledge economy refers to an economy that is based on the development of and the application of technology. Lifelong learning is the acquisition of a new set of skills "such as learning-to-learn, and analytic and group skills to be able to update skills successfully throughout their lives (World Bank, 2003)." The importance of lifelong learning skills and of paying attention to content

is reiterated by a recent World Bank study (2002) in India, which examines the perceptions of employers of SE graduates. According to the employers, secondary education graduates lacked knowledge and skills especially in communication; they were also not open to learning new skills. This study suggests that rather than prepare students for a particular skill, secondary education could prepare students with a set of generic skills that will help them adapt and learn quickly. These findings have implications for both vocational education to develop more generic skills and for general education to rethink its preparation of students.

➤ School level improvement is an important aspect of SE reform. Mukhopadhyay and Kumar (2001) in their study of 12 aided and seven government schools in Rajasthan found that school climate or ethos characterized by a principal with a vision and ability to motivate teachers and parents made certain schools more effective than others. It is unlikely that there is much autonomy and school level planning in government schools. Duraiswamy and Subramaniam's (1999) study of the effect of school management found that about 61 to 89 percent of the differences between the achievement of students in public and private (aided and unaided) schools were accounted for by management practices adopted by schools. Management practices in private schools include autonomy in student admissions, teacher recruitment, and expenditure. In addition to autonomy, other significant areas critical to school functioning include effective time management especially of teachers, school organization and accountability frameworks.

➤ The performance of students in examinations within the government school system suggests that teaching and learning in classrooms is weak across States. In the model that is currently practiced in classrooms, instruction upholds rote learning and memorization (Clarke, 2001). Class sessions consist of teachers lecturing from the textbook and asking closed questions requiring answers from the textbook. There are two approaches to improving the quality of education at this level. The first approach assumes that the content of SE and the way in which teachers teach in classrooms at present are acceptable, and then the question to be dealt with in this discussion would be as to how student performance in examinations can be improved. The low participation rate of students in rural areas in the science stream is a significant concern and as mentioned earlier, indicates students' lack of confidence in learning science (possibly due to weak upper primary education) and weak instruction in classrooms. In this scenario, positioning would not involve a revision of curricula or examination content. Here the subject content knowledge of teachers and the introduction of a clear accountability framework would be important.

➤ The process of monitoring of the sub-sector by the State has a profound effect on the quality of education in SE. The Inspectorates monitor this sub-sector. Inspectorates are usually located both at the State level and in the districts and there are variations across States as to how often and extensive this monitoring is. Furthermore, the policies and expectations and what happens in reality differ considerably. In Orissa, for example, each school has to be monitored once a year. Each Inspector is required to monitor 300 schools and a recent study by NUEPA (2001) reported that only about 30 percent of the schools are visited each year. Reasons for this, according to this study, are not only the large number of schools to be visited and their location but also the large number of court cases that have to be attended to.²⁵ The areas that are to be monitored include the extent to which schools follow departmental regulations and curricula, and maintain adequate accounts. Inspectors are supposed to submit a report to the department but they are not required to initiate thinking and a program of action for improving and developing the school. Clearly, the extent to which schools are ensuring levels of instruction and student learning are not being sufficiently monitored.

➤ The importance of SE and HSE cannot be underestimated, which also indicates that the investments made in secondary education will also have to be sizable and strategic. According to Godo (2002), developing countries must be prepared to bear the burden of such investments relative to their income before the stock of human capital can reach a level adequate to influence economic development.

➤ Planning for secondary education involves both national and State governments. Thus far the involvement of the Centre with the State has been piece meal and focuses on implementing national programs within States. This policy note suggests a far more strategic involvement of the Central government with the States.²⁷ This kind of strategic involvement is envisioned within the Government of India's 10th Plan; however, it would need to be operationalized. Possible direction for such strategic involvement could be to encourage and enable States to comprehensively plan for secondary education reform, focusing on areas identified in the 10th Plan such as equity, quality, and so on. Thus rather than the Centre deciding on a plan for developing particular areas of secondary education in the States, States could develop their own plans which could then be supported by the Centre. Support to the States could be based on a clear set of

performance indicators. In this situation, the Centre would also develop a range of technical resources, which States could draw upon depending on the focus and needs defined in their plans.

➤ The performance of students in SE portrays a critical need to improve the quality of instruction in SE schools. All the aspects related to quality require considerable attention – infrastructure, school improvement and teachers’ professional development. Again based on the positioning of this level of education, the specific areas within the area of infrastructure would be considered first. If the intention here is to continue the current curriculum and examination model, infrastructure needs would focus on laboratories rather than libraries. Teacher training in subject content knowledge and accountability systems for teachers and for schools would also be necessary. If on the other hand, lifelong learning skills become important then both libraries and laboratories will be important. School improvement and teachers’ professional development through reform in pre-service would be of paramount importance. Institutional reform (textbooks, curriculum and examinations) as well as intensive in-service training would be needed. A specific reference needs to be made here to IT education. In the current scenario where IT education is mainly confined to making students computer literate, it will be sufficient to introduce computers to students for a relatively short period of time. However, if computers are used to enhance and deepen core subject content knowledge, students would require them for longer lengths of time. The point here is that there is a wide variety in the infrastructure requirements for IT in schools, which depends on the overall objectives of the curriculum.

4. CONCLUSION

Since free and compulsory education to all children up to the age fourteen is the Constitutional commitment in India, all efforts in the past were focused on achieving the goal of universal elementary education. It is upper primary and secondary level of education that is now in the focus. Over time, secondary schooling facilities improved to a significant level but still there are a few areas of concern like Schooling facilities to a large number of habitations were not available. Government schools had lower percentage of buildings than the schools under the private managements. So far as the investment on education is considered, secondary education has never been the priority area of investment. In order to meet the challenge of Universalisation of Secondary Education, there is a need for a paradigm shift in the conceptual design of secondary education. The guiding principles in this regard are; Universal Access, Equality and Social Justice, Relevance and Development and Curricular and Structural Aspects. Universalisation of Secondary Education gives opportunity, to move towards equity. The concept of ‘common school’ will be encouraged. If these values are to be established in the system, all types of schools, including unaided private schools will also contribute towards Universalisation of Secondary Education by ensuring adequate enrolments for the children from under privileged society and the children Below Poverty Line families.

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