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India's quest for quality education: The challenges ahead

Dr. DYUTI CHATTERJEE

Assistant Professor, ST. XAVIR'S UNIVERSITY
dyuti.chatterjee@sxuk.edu.in

ABSTRACT :

The United Nations has set seventeen goals for sustainable development. One of the most significant goals among these is quality education as many other goals such as reduced inequality poverty, and decent work opportunities are directly related to it. The present paper explores the different facets of the Indian education system and discusses how it fares in terms of this goal. Based on secondary data sources like different government reports, the paper finds that though there has been some progress at the primary level of education due to consistent efforts by the government, there remain major challenges ahead. India suffers from very high dropout rates at the secondary level. Moreover, there are questions about the quality of education, especially in the rural areas. A major chunk of Indian youths is lacking requisite skills and remains unemployed. Education in India is marked by poor infrastructure, gender inequality, regional disparities and a pronounced rural -urban divide. The paper makes an in-depth analysis of the overall education system in India and recommends area specific reforms, higher public investment and greater emphasis on vocational and technical education. "Quality education" rests on the twin pillars of equity and efficiency. Thus, India needs to have a holistic approach towards education to meet the requirements of sustainable development.

Key words- Education, sustainable development, drop-outs, quality, infrastructure

Introduction

India has proclaimed that it shall be a developed nation by 2047. It is already the fourth largest economy in the world in terms of nominal GDP. Development however goes beyond GDP—it encompasses a wide spectrum of variables starting from freedom of choice to improvement in the standard of living. The concept of development has undergone several modifications in recent times. The United Nations developed eight goals as part of Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000 to be achieved around the world by 2015 which included achievement of universal primary education. This was again changed in the UN Summit in 2015 where the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was officially launched. The concept of sustainable development encompasses a holistic vision that integrates economic growth, social inclusion, as well as environmental protection. The United nation proclaimed seventeen goals as targets for the achievement of sustainable development. The only difference was that this time the objective shifted to quality education which was much broader in perspective than previous time. Quality education often holds the key to grapple with issues like poverty and the inequality in the economy. It is key to breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty, being associated with increased earning potential. (Rose & Dyer, 2008. It contributes to improving living standards and livelihoods. India however started planning for this earlier while introducing the concept of inclusive development in the eleventh plan. Even the NITI Ayog which replaced the Planning Commission in 2017 stresses on inclusive policies on social sectors like health and education. Thus, education continues to one of the most important pillars for sustainable development for developing countries like India. Quality education should instil skills and values that prepare individuals to participate actively in social, political, environmental, and economic spheres and make informed and responsible decisions.

India has the third largest education system in the world. Education belongs to the Concurrent List as it is managed by both state and Centre. Indian education system comprises of primary, secondary and tertiary education. India has over 260 million students enrolled in schools (from pre-primary to senior secondary).In higher education, there are around 40 million students enrolled in colleges and universities. All these are supported by a large teaching workforce and a huge institutional network of private and government schools, colleges and universities. India is only behind China and the United States in terms of total enrolment of students. The government has taken a proactive role to make education inclusive and accessible to all. Some of the government introduced measures which have helped to improvise the primary education system are discussed here.

Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (SSA) – The Sarva Siksha Abhiyan was launched in 2001, and its objective was universalization of Elementary Education (UEE)
.

Right to Education act- The Right to Education Act was enacted in 2009 but came into effect on April 1, 2010. Based on Article 21A of the Indian Constitution, it talks of provision of free and compulsory education for all children aged 6–14 years.

Mid-Day Meal Scheme -Launched in 1995 , the Mid-Day Meal scheme provides hot cooked meals to children in government and government aided schools. It was hugely successful in increasing the school attendance and retention of poor students.

Some of the state governments also have initiated specific programmes. Among the states, Kerala has been very consistent in its efforts for spreading education to all. This is reflected in the fact that it is a state with the highest literacy rates. The Madhya Pradesh government's 'Adopt a school' programme encourages local leaders to take responsibility of schools near their vicinity. The West Bengal government's Kanyasree programme which was launched

in 2013 has been recognised by the UNICEF. Under the Kanyasree scheme, a girl who is unmarried and is pursuing education after eighteen years from low-income family gets a cash award of 25, 000.

The Indian government spends 3-3.3% of GDP in education whereas developed countries often spend upto 6% of GDP in education. Elementary education comprises 8 years, followed by two years each of secondary and senior secondary education. Graduation takes 3–5 years depending on the stream; postgraduate programs last 2–3 years, with further scope for research. India's journey from a 12% literacy rate in 1947 to over 80% today is remarkable. It reflects decades of sustained effort through public policy, community mobilization, and government programs. However, the goal of universal, equitable, and quality education is still a work in progress. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has three main objectives

1.Encourage vocational training.
2.Shift to critical thinking and practical problem solving.
3. Accessible education for all.

However, the implementation of NEP has been inconsistent across states (UNESCO, 2023; World Bank).

The present paper consists of six sections. Section I comprises of the Introduction, Section II and III contain the Literature Review and the Objectives. Section IV and V look at the Methodology and the Empirical findings of the paper. Section VI concludes with specific recommendations to uplift the education system from plunging into mediocrity.

Literature Review

There is a huge body of literature addressing different aspects of education in India. Several authors have analysed the problem of dropouts in school level. T..Lakshmanasamy(2021)points out that despite government policies and programmes for affordable education, the lower-income households still incur a considerable proportion of their income on the education of their children. The proportion of household income spent on the education of children increases more in the lower quantiles than in the higher quantiles. Gender bias exists at the lower quantiles and is considerably less at the higher quantiles. The SC/Households spend less than the non-SC/ST communities at the lower quantiles and the difference gets reduced at higher quantiles. Das.A & Das . B(2023) states that lack of interest in education by both boys and girls is the most prominent reason for dropping out of school. The next most crucial reason that results in the discontinuation of education is poverty and financial constraints faced by the urban households of the Indian economy. Among other reasons, distance from school, absence of infrastructural amenities in school and lack of trained teachers are also identified. Additionally, apart from common reasons for school dropout, this study has also identified reasons of school dropout specific to girls and boys separately. Girls were expected to contribute towards household chores, look after the siblings, be married, and settled as major reasons for dropout whereas for boys, looking after the household income opportunities rather than continuing education was seen to be a vital factor to dropout from school. Another determinant of out-of-school is size of the household. An additional member in the household creates burden on the financial condition of the household and therefore deters the schooling of their children. It has been observed that if the head of the household is educated, positive spill over is created on the probability of its children to continue schooling. Yadav.S(2023)in his article discusses a comprehensive set of strategies aimed at combating girls' dropout rates in education. These strategies encompass financial incentives and scholarships to alleviate economic pressures, ensuring safe transportation, improve school infrastructure, and developing girl-friendly curricula. Additionally, health and nutrition support, flexible scheduling, legal protections against early marriage and child labour, and data-driven monitoring are essential elements. Khan.B(2017) states that while the Indian higher education system has made considerable progress in the last decade, it lags significantly in terms of "global relevance and competitiveness. Khan blames the absence of high-quality teaching staff and stresses that attracting and retaining high quality teachers is thus a primary requirement for an educational institution. It needs greater transparency and accountability. Several economists have tried to look at the regional disparity in education across the different states of the country. Vijnana(2023) points out that states characterized by high NSDP per capita have a positive association with learning outcomes. The regression analysis shows that among the social factors considered; proportion of ST population is negatively significant in determining reading achievement for children of age-group 5 to 16 and mathematics achievement for both the specifications. Female literacy rate has positive significant impact on mathematics achievement. The economic factors such as NSDP per capita have a positive significant effect on mathematics achievement. Among school-level factors, PTR has a negative effect on reading achievement and kitchen shed has a positive impact on reading achievement for children of age-group 5 to 16. Although the disparities exist, the convergence analysis shows some evidence of a reduction in the same. We find σ-convergence in mathematics achievement for Indian states but not in reading achievement. Also, the absolute and conditional βconvergence in the learning indicators among the states holds true. Thus, regional variations among states in learning indicators is found to decline over time.

Objectives

The paper tries to analyse the status of education in India at the primary, secondary and the tertiary level. The basic objectives of the paper can be summed up as

1. To evaluate the progress of primary education over time
2.To analyse the landscape of vocational education in the country.
3.To investigate the regional disparity in the educational level among the different states

Data Source and Methodology

This study is based on secondary data from various government reports such as the Ministry of Education Reports, UDISE+ (Unified District Information System for Education). It also uses other data sources such as the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), National Sample Survey Office . It chooses indicators such as dropout rates, literacy rates, enrolment ratios and college density to make a comparative analysis across time and regions. The paper is exploratory in nature. It chooses literacy rate and gross enrolment to analyse the primary education in the country. The condition of vocational training

is assessed through the number of institutions, the number of placements etc. In order to look at the regional disparity in the infrastructure of education mainly two parameters are chosen such as the college density per lakh and functional computer lab in each state.

Findings

In this section, we shall analyse India's performance for different levels of education- primary, secondary and tertiary. Post independence in 1951, India's literacy rate was abysmally low estimated at 18%. Most of the population resided in rural areas with limited access to educational institutions, while the education system remained predominantly elitist and urban-focused. Pronounced gender disparities were evident, with female literacy rates significantly trailing those of males.

Table1: Literacy rates (%) over the years

Year	Literacy rate	Rural Literacy	Urban Literacy
1951	18.3	12.1	56.2
1961	28.3	21.6	63.1
1971	34.5	26.6	68.2
1981	43.6	34	74.4
1991	52.2	41.8	79
2001	64.8	57.2	82.1
2011	69.3	67.8	85.7
2017-18	77.7	76.9	92.2
2023-24	80.9	77.5	88.9

Source- Different rounds of Census , NSSO and PLFS reports

The above table (Table 1) clearly shows that following the years post-independence, growth in literacy rate was slow. Most schools held their classes in a very informal way. One had to migrate from the rural areas to the cities for pursuing higher studies. However, post liberalisation, the growth has speeded up, thanks to the several initiatives of the government , the state governments and the growth of privatization. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2023–24, India's effective literacy rate (age 7+) is over 85% with notable progress in both rural and urban areas. The gross enrolment has also increased specially at the secondary level as evident from Table 2.However, disparities persist. Even after 78 years of independence, there are significant differences in rural-urban regions. Rural areas continue to lag behind their urban counterparts as evident from the literacy rates. Next is that female literacy still lags male literacy though the size of the gap is being reduced.

Table 2: Gross Enrolment ratio (%) over the years

Year	Primary enrolment	Secondary enrolment
1990	91.4	45
2001	94.3	45.2
2005	108.3	54
2010	115.5	63.1
2020	99.9	74

Source- AISHE ,Educational Statistics at a Glance

However, if these figures provide reasons to rejoice, the following data gives equal reasons to be concerned. Despite the new educational schemes and policies, the mean years of schooling i.e., 5.12 years is well below the other emerging market economies like China (8.17 years) and Brazil (7.54 years) and significantly below the average of other developing countries (7.09 years). India also fares poorly compared to countries like the USA and the UK when it comes to statistics such as the student- teacher ratio. The drop out ratio is still significantly high.(Table 3)

Table-3: Dropout Rate (%)in Secondary Education

Year	Boys	Girls	Total
2017–18	15.05	16.07	16.07
2018–19	16.07	14.60	14.60
2019–20	18.30	16.30	17.30
2021–22	14.90	14.20	14.60
2023–24	12.30	9.40	10.90

Source- Different rounds of UDISE

Dropout rate particularly among minorities like Muslims and marginalised sections of the economy like scheduled castes (SCs) and scheduled tribes (STs), remain high. Nearly 49% of tribal children drop out by secondary level. Dropouts are driven by poverty, infrastructural constraints and gender norms. Accessibility is a big problem especially for girls . Indian roads are not safe havens for girls. Moreover, they become more difficult to use during rainy season or even in winter in the absence of light. Thus, many girl students drop out because of safety concerns. For girls ,who have reached their puberty , it is a big problem to the school when they are in their menstrual cycle. Lack of female teachers make things worse in such scenarios. Another important reason why girls are forced to quit their studies and drop out is early marriage. In a patriarchal society like India, in rural areas where poverty is high, a girl's education always takes a back seat. If in a rural family, there are more than two children and one of them happens to be a boy, it is usually the male child who gets the priority of education. Education is perceived to give less return compared to boys as girls usually move out of their homes

after marriage. Thus, it is very common in the rural areas to renegade girls to household work.

Moreover, an increase in the GER doesn't imply an increase in the quality of education. ASER surveys (rural India) show that only 43.8 % of Class V students in 2022 could read Class II-level text, and just 25.9 % could do subtraction. The World Bank's "learning poverty" metric states that children unable to read a simple text by age ten is 70 % in India . Again, there is a big rural urban divide here. The good schools are usually located in the urban areas. They are equipped with ICT classrooms, proper laboratories, libraries and internet facilities whereas there are many rural schools which don't have electricity, drinking water or even sanitation facilities. Added to these problems are problems of teacher absenteeism , vacant positions and low quality of teachers.

A pressing concern for the Indian education circuit is the emphasis on memorising and less attention to critical thinking, practical based methodologies used in teaching. Thus, students face a huge problem when they enter the job market. In many countries, students who do not want to pursue higher education opt for vocational training. Vocational education is primarily focused on equipping individuals with specific trades or occupational skills that are directly linked to employment. These may include training in areas like, beautician work, hospitality, data entry, etc. Vocational education is less theory-oriented and more centered on hands-on skills that can be quickly applied in real-world work environments.

Vocational training is often delivered through Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) and Industrial Training Centres (ITCs).Polytechnics offer technical education at the diploma level. These programs typically span three years and are pursued after Class X or Class XII. However, in India, the ITI's are in poor shape without inadequate infrastructural conditions and insufficient placement opportunities.

In India, the tertiary education starts after class XII. A general degree course used to be of 3 years, after which there was a post-graduation of 2 years. Those who wanted to pursue further higher studies could do a P.HD. Technical education, on the other hand, refers to the academic and practical training in engineering, technology, and applied sciences. A student who wants to undergo technical education can either do a diploma (usually through polytechnic institutes) or pursue a B.Tech/B.E and follow it up with an M.Tech/M.E, and doctoral programs. The Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), National Institutes of Technology (NITs) ,private and state engineering colleges are the institutions which offer engineering degrees.

Table 4: An overview of vocational and technical education in India

Indicator	Value
Total ITIs (Govt. + Pvt.)	13,000+
Total Polytechnic Institutes	3,660
Total Enrolment (ITI)	6 million
Total Enrolment (Polytechnic)	1.2 million
Avg. Placement Rate (ITI)	24–25%
Avg. Placement Rate (Polytechnic)	60% (urban institutes)

Source- AICTE & State board reports

A technical degree like engineering is of four years after which the student can directly join the job market. In India , there is a greater supply of students with a general degree compared to students with technical degrees. Technical degrees are more expensive than general degrees. Girls specially are less inclined to go for technical degrees than males. Another point to be noted here is that is that, in India, the number of engineers is greater than diploma holders.

Lastly the section focusses on the significant regional disparities in the education across the country. While there are states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu which excel in literacy, retention, and higher education enrollment, there are states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan who perform poorly in all the areas . These gaps emerge from numerous historical, socio-economic, policy-driven, and infrastructure factors. Educational disparity in India stems from colonial policies. British colonial government emphasized Western education in coastal towns and political hotspots like Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta, neglecting significant sections of North India. Missionary-led education initiatives also helped states like Kerala before independence. These historical obstacles have hampered the education system of the states. Economic growth substantially affects educational progress. Wealthier states like Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra spend more resources on the education in schools, teacher 's training, and digital infrastructure . This has led to an improvement in retention and learning outcomes. On the other hand, poorer states like Bihar and Jharkhand have fewer schools, teacher vacancies, and inadequate facility maintenance due to fiscal constraints and governance issues. Low-income states rely on central government grants, which are not always sufficient or timely. Governance quality impacts educational policy implementation. Effective bureaucracies and steady political leadership have helped Himachal Pradesh and Kerala universalize school education and ensure accountability. Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Odisha struggle to implement policies due to corruption, insufficient monitoring, and teacher absenteeism. Infrastructure still determines learning outcomes. States with good infrastructure—toilets, clean water, computer labs, libraries—have greater attendance and learning rates. UDISE+ data shows that Southern and Western states have stronger educational infrastructure than Northern and Eastern states. Inequality has worsened due to the digital gap, especially after COVID-19. Without internet connection and digital gadgets, Bihar and Chhattisgarh failed to adapt to online learning, but Kerala and Karnataka did well.

Conversely, in states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Odisha, corruption, weak monitoring, and frequent teacher absenteeism hamper policy implementation. Infrastructure remains a key determinant of learning outcomes. States with well-developed infrastructure—functional toilets, clean drinking water, computer labs, libraries—tend to have higher attendance and learning levels. According to UDISE+ data, Southern and Western states have better school infrastructure compared to their Northern and Eastern counterparts. Additionally, the digital divide has worsened inequality, particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. States like Kerala and Karnataka were able to transition to online learning more effectively, while states like Bihar and Chhattisgarh struggled due to lack of internet access and digital devices. Table 5 brings into light the disparity among selected states with regards to the percentage of schools having laboratories with functional computers.

Table5-Functional Computer Labs in different states

State/UT	Percentage of Schools with Functional PCs
Gujarat	98
Punjab	97
Kerala	99
UP	33.7
Bihar	18
West Bengal	18
Odisha	24.9
Sikkim	90
Average of other N.E states	22.7

Source-UDISE+ 2023–24

Language of instruction can also lead to exclusion. In many tribal and multi-lingual regions, the official language of instruction does not align with the students' mother tongue, creating early learning barriers. States that have taken multilingual approaches (e.g., Andhra Pradesh's early-grade bilingual programs) have seen better foundational literacy.

Educational disparities are further magnified by deep-rooted caste, gender, and tribal inequities. In tribal belts of Odisha, Jharkhand, and North-Eastern states, access to schools is hindered by remoteness, conflict zones, and cultural dissonance with mainstream curriculum. The college density of a state gives a glimpse of the foundation of higher learning in a state.

Table 6-College density per lakh of the population of selected states

State	College density
Karnataka	66
Andhra Pradesh	49
Kerala	46
Himachal Pradesh	47
Tamil Nadu	40
Rajasthan	40
Telangana	52
Madhya Pradesh	29
Gujrat	31
Uttar Pradesh	30
Maharashtra	34
Andhra Pradesh	49

Source- AISHE 2022-23

The College density of a state reflects the availability of higher education institutions relative to the population size. The above table clearly shows that the Southern states like Karnataka and Kerala exhibit much higher college density than the Northern states like Uttar Pradesh.(Table 6) Higher college density implies better access to higher education, which is a gateway to greater employment opportunities. College density in general has increased from 27 per lakh (2014-15) to 32 per lakh (2020-21) which is a sign of progress and shows the willingness of the government to expand education infrastructure across the country. However, states like Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal still lag significantly behind the national average. Bihar had only 7 colleges/lakh whereas states like Jharkhand, West Bengal ranged from 8 to 13/lakhs. Uttar Pradesh despite being one of the states with the largest number of colleges indicating fewer colleges relative to their youth population. This suggests limited higher education access in these states. The government should keep this data in mind and divert resources on states where college availability is low .

Conclusion

According to the United Nations, all countries should achieve the goals of sustainable development by 2030. Education is widely recognized as an essential component of sustainable development as it facilitates the social and economic progress of a nation. For India, quality education remains one of the most challenging goals that needs to be addressed because it holds the key to achieving other important sustainable goals such as decent work, removal of inequalities etc. But there are many loopholes that need to be addressed before that. India is the third largest education system in the world after China and the US in terms of the total number of students, institutions etc. However, there many Indians for whom education is not accessible. Leaving Kerala and Mizoram, there are other states where a large number of people are still illiterates. Even when parents get their wards enrolled, they drop off at later stages because of poverty and other issues. The continuance of education is more challenging for the girl child in the absence of educational institutions in proximity, lack of sanitation facilities in school and safety reasons. The quality of education in rural areas is often compromised due to the lack of availability of good teachers, infrastructural support like libraries, internet facilities etc. There is huge regional disparity with rural urban divide. Though overall there is gender inequality in enrolment, it is seen that the enrolment of girls is less in private schools than boys. Private schools located

in urban areas offer better quality of education than the public schools in rural areas. Indian education is more theory based. There is an inclination towards general education over technical or vocational training. It is found that a huge chunk of Indian youths does not have the necessary skills required for the job market. It needs to be ensured that every individual, regardless of gender, cast receives quality education. The focus should be on providing a holistic education that would improve the functional and analytical ability of the students and therefore open new opportunities for them in the labour markets. A better educated labour force is essential for increasing the economic growth of the country that would be both inclusive and sustainable in the long run.

Recommendations

Based on the above analysis, certain recommendations can be suggested

Firstly, public spending needs to be increased in education. Greater investment is needed to upgrade the infrastructure specially in the rural areas . Every school must have proper drinking water and toilet facilities. There should be libraries so that poor students do not need to buy books. Internet facilities along with modern laboratories should be there so that students who take up Science subjects don't lag behind their urban peers in any way. Every school can have its own transport.

Secondly, general awareness must be created that a girl child is no less than a male child in educational accomplishment or job prospects. Girls should be encouraged to take up disciplines other than Arts. Schools should establish counselling systems and implement gender sensitive policies.

Thirdly, there should be a reorientation of school curriculum which should give more emphasis to practical knowledge keeping in mind the needs of the market. Focus should be on problem-solving, creativity, and analytical skills There can be more collaboration with industries at college and university level.

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