

# Education as a Driver of Social Equity: An Overview

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## *Abstract*

*Education is a potential tool to reduce poverty by opening the doors to employment which paves the way to access to healthcare, nutrition and peace and stability. It also serves as the medium to inculcate social sensitivity among the citizens and for creating social equity in the society. Modern Indian society is characterised by the marked rise in social inequities, but its predominantly young population present a silver lining whose potential when channelized could usher in the much needed social transformation. Quality education and equitable access to it are essential for the positive transformation to happen. This paper looks at the status of education in India, the legal environment and the executive measures taken to address the pertinent issue of ushering social equity by ensuring accessible and equitable quality education to the youth of this country.*

**Key words-** education, social equity, legal and executive measures

## **Introduction**

Education is recognised as a key instrument to drive the development agenda in all the third world nations. It is one of the important means to help reduce poverty, improve access to healthcare and usher in peace and stability and ensure gender equality in these regions. It is perceived as a gateway to employment opportunities and a great leveller in the society. Individually education opens the door to career prospects and raises the standard of living of the people by ensuring access to income. It steers the nation to economic development and promotes social unity and solidarity. Education is vital for the ability of citizens to inculcate values and adopt life styles to create a sustainable future and positive societal transformation.

India is an emerging economy and it is predicted to be a super power in the years to come. But it is a grim fact that India is still home to about a quarter of the world's poor and social inequalities in the country are alarmingly on the rise. We have pockets of the country where there is tremendous growth and development in stark contrast to certain others areas which are abysmally poor. As economists Amartya Sen and Jean Drèze described in their book, "An Uncertain Glory: India and its Contradictions", the lopsided growth witnessed in India is akin to islands of California being surrounded by the extremely poor states of the African continent. However India's youth population of over 600 million below the age of 25 and nearly 28% of the population below the age of 14 offer a ray of hope. This demographic dividend can spur economic growth and development. It can also pave the way to reduce the social inequities. Education and skill training are the need of the hour to harness the potential of the youth and to achieve the desired social transformation.

## **Research Objective**

This paper looks at the legal milieu that gives the mandate to the government to create social equity through various measures including education, the status of the education sector in India, the policies and

programmes adopted by the Government to make this demographic dividend a reality through the education sector reforms.

### **The Legal Framework in India**

The Constitution is the supreme law of the land and it clearly states that social equality is one of the goals that the architects of modern India were keen to achieve. There are several provisions in our constitution that provide for protection and promotion of the interests of the socially disadvantaged groups. The Constitution mandates the state to make provisions for the advancement of any socially and economically backward classes of citizens or for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. (Art. 15 (4)). Art. 15 (5) allows the state to make special provisions for backward classes or SCs or STs for admissions in private educational institutions, aided or unaided. Art. 16 (4) allows the state to reserve appropriate vacancies in the public service for any backward classes of the state that are not adequately represented in the public services. Art. 16 (4) (A) allows the state to implement reservation in the matter of promotion for SCs and STs. Art. 16 (4)(B) allows the state to consider unfilled vacancies reserved for backward classes as a separate class of vacancies not subject to a limit of 50% reservation. Art. 17 abolishes the practice of untouchability. Art. 19 (5) empowers the state to impose restrictions on freedom of movement or of residence to the benefit of scheduled tribes. The directive principles of state policy enjoins the states to promote the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections, especially SC and ST (Art.46). The Constitution allows special grant in aids to states for tribal welfare (Art275), allows reservation of seats for SC/ST in the parliament as well as in state legislatures (Art330/332) and provides for reservation of one-third seats in the panchayats (Art 40). It allows relaxation in qualifying marks for admission in educational institutes or promotions for SCs/STs (Art335). It provides for establishment of a national commission of SCs and STs (338/338A/339). The President is further empowered to appoint a commission to investigate the condition of socially and economically backward classes (Art340).

A major fillip to the cause of education has been insertion of Article 21A in the Constitution which ensures that children below the age of fourteen have compulsory access to education. Also Article 51A (k) imposes a fundamental duty on every parent or guardian to provide opportunities for education to his child, between the age of 6 and 14 years. The enactment of The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009 as a consequence of Article 21A, provides every child with a right to full time elementary education. India now has a rights based framework that imposes obligation on both the Central and State Governments to implement the fundamental right to education as enshrined in the Constitution and the provisions of the RTE Act.

## Status of Education in India

The net enrolment ratio in primary education for boys and girls is 100%. According to All India Survey on Higher Education 2017-18 released by MHRD, Government of India, total enrolment in higher education has been estimated to be with 36.6 million (Gross Enrolment Ratio- 25.8%) with 19.2 million boys and 17.4 million girls. Girls constitute 47.6% of the total enrolment. However the GER for Scheduled Castes is only 21.8% and for Scheduled Tribes is 15.9% which is well below the national GER of 25.8%. In the villages where roughly two-thirds of the total population of youth within the age 18 years are living, though 94% of girls and 95% of boys are enrolled in school by the age of 14 ; by the age 18, 68% of girls and 72% of boys only continue to study in school. It is to be noted that as the age increases the gap of enrolment also increases between the two genders. It is disheartening to note that 14% of youth do not receive any form of formal education. Overall, about 5% of youth are enrolled in some type of vocational course. It is observed that those who take vocational courses tend to take short duration courses of 6 months or less. A substantial proportion of youth in the 14-18 age group are working (42%), irrespective of the fact whether they are enrolled in formal education or not. Of those who work, 79% work in agriculture, more than three quarters of all youth (77 % of males and 89% of females) do household chores daily.

Figures from NSS (National Sample Survey) show that around 4.20 per cent of tribal children are out of school followed by SCs (3.24 per cent), OBCs (3.07 per cent) and others (1.87 per cent) at the all India level. Educational statistics of MHRD, 2013-14, show that around 48.2 per cent of tribal children drop out before completing their elementary education and with regard to SC children it is 38.8 per cent.

India has enrolled more children than ever before in secondary schools, but the quality of education especially in rural schools is abysmal. Among 14-18-year-olds surveyed by the ASER, only 43% could solve a class IV mathematics problem. The low learning levels were noted not only in mathematics, but also geography, reading in the regional language and also simple English sentences. Also ICT based learning is limited despite Computer Literacy and Studies being introduced as part of the curriculum in Schools.

The other concern areas focussed during the drafting of the new education policy is the shortage of more than 5 lakh teachers in elementary schools; many government secondary schools not having the prescribed minimum of 6 teachers and teacher vacancies being more pronounced in tribal areas and remote villages. Teacher absenteeism is another matter of concern as is the high dropout rates.

In the higher education sector, the critical area that needs immediate attention is the lack of employability skills of the college students especially those who have completed graduate, post graduate courses and also engineering courses. An All India Council for Technical Education report (2017) found that over 60 percent of eight lakh engineers graduating from various engineering institutions in the country were unemployed. The credibility of higher education as a means to better livelihood through employment

prospects is in question as the products of our education system lack the employability skills. This brings to the fore the crucial need for thrust on vocational skill development of the youth.

### Government Schemes

Education being a subject of the concurrent list, the Governments both at the centre and the state have launched numerous schemes to achieve the goals set in the Right to Education Act. To highlight the thrust of the Government initiative a few of the central government schemes are enumerated here under.

The three Schemes Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan and Teacher Education were incorporated in the Samagra Shiksha which aims to improve school education in terms of equal opportunities to learn and also equitable learning outcomes from pre-school to the XII standard.

To provide Mid-Day Meal to the school going children which aims to not only enhance enrolment but also retain them in schools while improving their nutritional levels the National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education has been conceived.

To boost the infrastructure in Private, Aided/Unaided Minority Schools/Institutions so that the quality of education is enhanced, the Scheme for Infrastructure Development in Minority Institutes has been launched.

Scheme to Provide Quality Education in Madrasas aims to help the Madrasas attain standards of the national education system in formal education subjects.

To facilitate functional literacy of the illiterate population in the age group of 15 years and over Saakshar Bharat has been launched. It is estimated that about 14 million Scheduled Castes (SCs), 8 million Scheduled Tribes (STs), 12 million minorities & 36 million others including 60 million women would benefit from this initiative.

To provide academic and technical support to adult and continuing education through development and production of material and training modules the State Resource Centre(s) were created.

Vocational training to all including the school drop outs is delivered by the Jan Shikshan Sansthan.

To involve the NGOs in the promotion of functional literacy, skill development and continuing education the Scheme of Support to NGOs for Adult Education and Skill Development has been established under the purview of National Literacy Mission.

### Research Findings

- 1) The GER for primary schools has been achieved.
- 2) The quality of education imparted in schools and colleges leaves a lot to be desired. ICT based learning integration not realised to its full potential.

- 3) Teacher absenteeism and teacher vacancy to be dealt with utmost urgency.
- 4) Access to education including vocational training yet to reach all the marginalised population in spite of the legal impetus and executive programmes.
- 5) Implementation gaps of the Acts and schemes need to be plugged.
- 6) Employability of the higher education products to be enhanced
- 7) Skill development among the youth to be focussed upon to take advantage of the demographic dividend.

## Conclusion

To improve the quality of education the first step would be to curb teacher absenteeism especially in the tribal areas and the remote villages. Incentives may be offered to teachers of these areas. India is in the midst of the growth trajectory and the government has launched a lot of developmental programmes like Digital India, Skill India, Make in India and Smart Cities. These have a direct bearing to the quality of education imparted in our schools and colleges. There is an urgent need for mainstreaming of vocational education, practical knowledge, hands-on projects and courses oriented towards meeting the needs of industry and employment.

The future of the country rests in the hands of the younger generation and it is imperative that the education imparted in the schools also instils and inculcates life skills like punctuality, cleanliness, self-control, hard work, sincerity, entrepreneurship, sensitivity to social equity, respect and care for the elderly and an innate responsibility to preserve the environment. Education has a tremendous power to transform the society and India is at the cusp of exponential growth it is time that the government and the civil society acted in tandem to deliver quality education to every single child of the country. If this becomes a reality, then India will surely be right on track to become a super power in the years to come.

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