

Universal Secondary Education in India: An Introductory Overview of Issues, Challenges and Prospects



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Education as a powerful instrument of social transformation has been widely recognised for a long period all over the world. Ever since India gained Independence in 1947, making education available to all has been a priority for the government. Over the last several decades, there has been considerable expansion of education. But the growth has been uneven across levels of education. Though education is to be seen as a continuum, the need for looking at each level of education has, hence, become obvious in policy making and planning education. Immediately after Independence, the Government of India set up a committee under the chairmanship of Dr. A. L. Swami Mudaliar in 1952 (Government of India 1952–1953), to examine the problems relating to secondary education, but secondary education has not received enough attention; the policy attention got focussed on elementary education and also on higher education. Though in the recent years, the government has taken up a few initiatives on promoting secondary education, bias of the researchers also has been against secondary education and in favour of elementary and higher education and it is slowly changing.

Given the Constitutional Directive, during the post-Independence period, and more particularly since the mid-1990s, with the launching of the District Primary Education Project in India, the Education For All (EFA), and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) programmes at global level, the education agenda in India focussed predominantly on improving access to primary education and later elementary education. Even though the progress in universalisation of elementary education has been impressive, quite a few major challenges remain. While elementary education and, to some extent, higher education has received some priority in India, relatively secondary education has been subject to severe neglect. It was assumed that secondary education has no particular role in the development of a developing,

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poor agrarian country. This has been the case in many countries and it is only recently the thinking is slowly changing.

With the rapid growth in elementary education, partly attributable to some of the moves mentioned above, including the nation-wide mid-day meals programme, the Right to Education (RTE), and the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), in recent years the need to shift attention to secondary education has begun to be felt. Most children enrolled in elementary education expect to continue on with secondary education. It is also being realised, only recently, that secondary education plays a crucial role in the development of the society—in raising economic growth, improving income distribution, reducing poverty, and improving human development. While primary education imparts the three basic Rs, rarely does it provide skills necessary for employment—self-employment or otherwise, ensure some wages and economic livelihood (Tilak 2013). Moreover, most of the literacy and primary education programmes are also found to be not imparting literacy that is sustainable, to ensure that children do not relapse into illiteracy. Secondly, primary or even elementary education rarely serves as a terminal level of education. Thirdly, even if primary education imparts some valuable attributes in terms of attitudes and skills, and is able to raise people from below the poverty line to above the poverty line, it is possible that this could be *just above* the poverty line, but not much above; and, as such, the danger of their relapsing into below the poverty line at any time could be high, which the skills and attributes acquired at primary level may not be able to prevent. In the knowledge economy, a person with mere eight years of schooling is as disadvantaged as an illiterate person. After all, it is secondary education that consolidates the gains received from elementary education as it provides much needed education and training and equips the youth with skills, aptitudes and values for a productive life, which are essential for the youth to enter the next phase. By imparting necessary skills, post-elementary education can keep people above the poverty line without the danger of falling back into poverty trap—educational poverty and/or income poverty. It provides skills required for an increasingly technology driven labour market and production systems; and it is secondary (and more importantly higher education) that helps in innovating technology and in sustaining growth. Development effects of education take effect fully at the secondary level. It is secondary education that can ensure a higher quality of life, by increasing the social, occupational and economic levels of the households. Serving as a critical preparatory phase for youth to enter either the labour market or higher education, secondary education is being increasingly recognised, thus, as a critical element in achieving the goals of human development, social progress, political stability and economic growth (Tilak 2007). As a recognition of all this, secondary education also became a part of social development goals (SDGs), formulated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

Active participation of the youth in social, political, and economic spheres at the national level and in the global knowledge economy requires at least good quality secondary education. So, the natural next step to universalize elementary education is universalisation of secondary schooling among the country's youth, so that the basic learning capabilities that they are likely to achieve at the elementary level are cultivated further at the post-elementary level, contributing to the growth of their

cognitive knowledge, abstract and critical thinking, and practical skills. In short, there is an increased awareness and even general consensus that Education For All in a country like India will not be complete even with the achievement of universalisation of elementary education, and that it needs to cover secondary education. Secondary education is important for economic growth and development (World Bank 2009).

While the RTE was being formulated and during the following period, there was a huge demand from academia and civil society that RTE should cover the whole school education, including secondary education. There is also a big demographic pressure building up, which will turn into a big problem, unless specific strategies are formulated to turn it into a dividend by providing quality secondary education and training to our youth. Thirdly, it is also being realised that goals relating to good quality elementary education and strong higher education cannot be met without strong, well spread quality secondary education. In response to some of these concerns, the Central Advisory Board on Secondary Education (2005) has suggested that secondary education should be made universal, though not necessarily made compulsory. Provisioning of secondary education should be based on a rights-based approach, like elementary education, and the access to it needs to be provided in a comprehensive way. Universal access, as the CABE defined is access in a comprehensible manner that is physical, social, cultural and economic. Slowly acknowledging all this, the Government of India has launched a few years ago the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) on the lines of SSA, with the objective of universalising secondary education. The RMSA sought to put in place the necessary infrastructure, procedures, norms etc., to remove gender and socio-economic barriers and promised '*universal access to secondary level education by 2017, i.e. by the end of 12th Five Year Plan and achieving universal retention by 2020*'. The target, as suggested by the CABE includes universal enrolment in secondary education, full retention of children in schools until they complete the secondary level, and attainment of mastery in all kinds of learning tasks by more than 60% learners. Despite significant economic growth and wide spread achievements in education sector, the promise is yet to be realised. Apart from the RMSA, a few schemes have also been launched by the union and state governments to strengthen public provisioning of secondary education in India. The Government of India has initiated, among others, special programmes such as *Shaala Siddhi* and school leadership to improve quality of education and leadership at the school level.

It appears that the government is also planning to extend the RTE to secondary education, on the basis of recommendation of a sub-committee of the CABE (2015a). Recognising the linkages between elementary and secondary education, the Central Advisory Board of Education has also recommended integration of SSA and RMSA. Accordingly, very recently the government has launched in 2018 the *Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan*, which will probably replace Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and RMSA. These initiatives are also reflective of the realisation by the State that for the development of the modern nation, universal, strong, equitable and quality secondary education is essential.

What are the implications of these new initiatives? If the RTE is to be extended to cover secondary education, will secondary education necessarily have the key

features of the RTE, which are free, compulsory, universalism, quality and most importantly education as a right. If not, what is the meaning of extension of the RTE to secondary education? Will it cover upper/senior secondary education?

The new SSA—the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan—is proposed to cover elementary education, secondary education, vocational education and teacher education, which have been presently working in isolation from each other, and to bring them into an integrated framework, partly recognising the close links between them. While a holistic integrated approach to school education is desirable, in fact, not just school education, the entire education sector from primary to higher, including adult and continuing education, has to be seen as a continuum, and accordingly, educational policy makers and planners have to adopt an integrated holistic approach to education sector as a whole, recognising the inter-linkages between the several levels of education and their inter-dependence on each other, there are several issues that need to be carefully analysed, understood and planned at each level of education. After all, some do require level-specific policy interventions. Does *Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan* base on such an understanding? Does the Abhiyan mean only in terms of funding—funding school education as a whole, rather than by level/type of school education, or does it mean a truly integrated approach to the school education system, making every school a composite/comprehensive school from Grade I (if not Pre-primary) to Grade X (or XII), with common teachers, common infrastructure, and common policies and approaches. Does it involve breaking of hierarchy in school system, and a move towards a common school system? One would expect such features to figure in the new model. The Dr Kasturirangan Committee that prepared the *Draft National Education Policy 2019* (MHRD 2019) also made a similar proposal, apart from going further in recommending universalisation of school education covering from pre-primary to higher secondary levels. The programme requires a huge amount of financial resources, millions of additional trained teachers, vast infrastructure in terms of buildings, laboratories, libraries, ICT facilities, etc., and above all, a strong political commitment. On all these aspects, we presently face unfortunately a huge deficit.

It is also important to note that unlike elementary education, the nature and purpose of secondary education are different. Quality of secondary education has to be broad: it has to focus not only on learning levels, but also prepare youth with good general and specific skills for employment and citizenship with human values. Also at the same time, it should prepare high quality students for higher education. Secondary education requires teachers; but typical pupil–teacher ratio may not serve as a good measure for planning, as we need subject teachers in large numbers at secondary level. Secondary education is also diverse, as it includes academic, as well as vocational and technical education/training streams, imparting knowledge, skills and universal human values all at the same time.

Today, there are 62 million students in secondary (including senior secondary) education in the country. The gross enrolment ratio at lower secondary level was 78.5% and at the senior secondary level it was 54.2% in 2016–17. These gross figures underline how far we are from universal secondary education. A more worrisome aspect is the high rate of drop-out in secondary education, with 35% of the

students enrolled in grade IX dropping out before completing grade X and another 38% before completing grade XII. The quality of secondary education, reflected in poor employability of secondary school graduates and/or their unsuitability for admission in higher education, is also a matter of serious concern. Secondary education is also associated with a high degree of inequalities—regional and inter-state, between different social groups and economic classes. In short, secondary education is associated with the familiar ‘elusive triangle’ of quantitative expansion, quality and equity in education. An important feature of secondary education scene in India is the existence of a high proportion of private schools—government supported private institutions and, more importantly, private unaided institutions as a proportion of all schools. The latter have increased in large numbers in the recent past, to surpass the total size of the other two types—government and government aided private schools. At the same time, it is increasingly being noted that the latter are associated with several maladies and unfair practices.

To sum up, secondary education in India faces serious glitches on several fronts. As per the gross enrolment ratios, there continues to be a large number of children who need to be brought into secondary schools. Secondly, with near universal enrolment, inequalities in elementary education may not be high; but the inequalities begin to take strong roots in secondary education; thirdly, more than half the secondary schools are in the private sector, with a major proportion of them being unaided or self-financing schools, depending exclusively on student fees, which may also be the cause of inequalities in education and, in turn, in society at large. Fourth, the school system as a whole, including secondary education, faces serious shortage of teachers. Partly to answer the problems of resource scarcity, the government is serious about public–private partnerships, privatisation and other similar measures, evidence on the effects of which is not encouraging. Lastly, education, including secondary education, is facing a serious shortage of funds. Given all this, what are the prospects for universalisation of secondary education?

In fact, quite a few more important questions arise in the minds of the academia as well as policy makers and planners in this context.

First, given the growth in elementary education experienced during the last few decades, and given the experience with the implementation of quite a few initiatives during the last couple of decades, including DPEP, EFA, SSA, RTE, mid-day meals and others, what are the prospects of achieving universal secondary education in the next few years? What are the pre-requisites and other essential points of policy action for achieving this laudable goal? Based on results of an econometric modelling exercise used to find out the factors impacting secondary completion rates, *P. Prudhvikar Reddy, D. Sree Rama Raju and V. Nagi Reddy* (in this volume) forecast that at the national level only 62% children in the age group of 14–15 years would be enrolled by 2020 and, given the trend, 100% net enrolment ratio (NER) would be achieved only by 2038; similarly, it would take 80 years beyond 2020 to achieve 100% net enrolment of children in the age group of 16–17 years. It was inferred that universalisation of secondary education even in states like Andhra Pradesh and Telangana was a distant dream. Apart from the enrolment, the learning levels in both the states and also in India are a major concern as well.

Second, the education system is expanding in terms of infrastructure, buildings, and other facilities; and enrolments are exploding. Thus even as there has been remarkable quantitative progress, questions persist on the quality of education and learning levels of the school children. While impressive improvement in the enrolment of children in primary, upper primary, secondary and higher secondary stages has been observed, learning levels are found to be continuously declining and that there are wide socio-economic differences not just in enrolment, but also more strikingly in levels of learning. The Annual Status of Education Reports (ASER) (Pratham Foundation, several years) every year highlight the huge learning deficit amongst children—how children of a particular age do not have the learning competencies that are required of them for that age. In this context, how does one ensure that in the effort to universalise secondary education, the quality of education is also adequately taken care of? What are the measures required to provide good quality education to secondary school students so that they gain skills, knowledge, values and attitudes that go beyond the narrowly defined learning outcomes?

Third, quality of education critically depends upon the availability of teachers in adequate numbers and of appropriate quality. But teacher shortage has become the bane at every level of education in India—primary, upper primary, secondary, higher secondary and higher education. Teacher–student ratios are increasing and have reached alarming levels in some institutions, if not in any State as a whole, on average. We also have a large number of untrained teachers, contractual teachers and even para teachers. The question is: if we have to universalise secondary education with quality, what are the ways in which the problems relating to the teacher shortage and teacher quality can be addressed.

Fourth, generally it is held that secondary education can be regarded potentially as a first meaningful terminal level of education. But, for it to be a meaningful terminal level of education that ensures access to good job market and decent wages, secondary education needs to be providing good knowledge, skills and attitudes. The Kothari Commission (Education Commission 1966) stated long ago that along with the academic stream, it is imperative to have skill orientation through vocational training and technical training programmes. Vocational and technical education/training has its own positive effects on economic growth (Tilak 1988b). But it has not been paid serious attention. Though the experience with vocational secondary education has not been satisfactory, the recently launched national skill development programme promises good prospects in employability of our youth. What then are the strategies required to produce secondary school graduates who can confidently enter labour market and, at the same time, be eligible for admission in higher education.

Finally, where do we get the money for universalisation of secondary education and what are the options available. Though money does not necessarily solve all the problems in education, it is critically important; rather, it forms an essential condition, but not a sufficient condition for development of education. While we have the target of spending 6% of the national income on education, as recommended by the Kothari Commission, we are currently spending just about 4%. Every level of education seems to be suffering from shortage of resources to fulfil the basic objectives of expansion, quality and equity. Given this background, how does one

ensure resource adequacy for universalisation of secondary education and also ensure that the allocated resources are efficiently spent?

There are quite a few suggestions being made for the development of education, some of which are articulated elaborately in the following chapters. First, while planning for universalising secondary education, focus should be laid on the serious glitches on several fronts, viz., bringing the large number of out of school children into secondary schools; dealing with issues of inequalities that have taken serious roots in secondary education; addressing issues of shortage of teachers, inadequacy of funds; and regulating the practices of private schools, and other such measures. There is an immense need to strengthen rather to rejuvenate government schools on a large scale, which requires huge investment of financial resources, quality teachers, infrastructure, etc. Strong political will and social commitment is needed to improve education status, quality improvement, reduction in inequality and improvement in governance. Governance reforms are critical for improving quality and for reducing inequalities. A sound policy design and strategies for effective implementation need to be developed.

Second, in order to eliminate or to reduce inequities emanating from the dual system of education that exists for different strata in the society, a common school system of education with neighbourhood school may be the best method. The Right to Education Act in its comprehensive spirit needs to be extended to secondary education, so that secondary education is also provided free, compulsory and it is of equitable good quality. Instead of talking about universalisation of any one level of school education, it is better considering the universalisation of school education as a whole that includes higher secondary level also.

Third, there is a need to lay special emphasis on quality of education and learning levels of children in schools. In addition to providing good quality trained teachers, the curriculum needs to be redesigned in such a way that all children, irrespective of their social and economic background are able to cope up with the system, which will help in preventing dropping out or pushing out from school. A well-designed curriculum would also help to imparting good values, attitudes and knowledge, besides skills. At the secondary level of education, it is important that students are sensitised about dignity of labour, world of work and career options. There is a need for a proper mix of skill-oriented training and academic subjects in secondary education, and this mix should be compulsory for all. Options regarding vocational training programmes, skill development programme, have to be carefully designed.

Fourth, there is an enormous growth of private schools in the country and a large number of them are run on commercial principles. Many such profit-oriented, non-philanthropic private schools cause more and more inequalities in education and in society at large. These schools also impart values among children which may hinder the development of a humane society. There should be a tough regulation on the growth of such private schools in the country and their functioning. The Draft National Education Policy 2019 promises immediate closure of all such schools.

This volume consisting of about 20 articles by eminent scholars in the field drawn from all over the country, an outcome of the Seminar organised by the Council for Social Development on Universalisation of Secondary Education (14–15 July 2018),

will be a valuable addition to the scanty literature on secondary education in India, as it sheds light on some of the contemporary critical issues on universal secondary education that are hitherto neglected. Based on rich database, the contributors to this volume examine in depth some of the many critical issues in secondary education. Many chapters are rich in database and empirical details and some are rich in policy discussions. The contributors covered all India and also quite a few specific states in their state level studies. Some have also examined issues and evidence at district and sub-regional levels. The analyses provide not only valuable insights into the current status of secondary education, but they also point towards the needed strategies and approaches.

At the very outset, in the policy context, we have to realise, as *Sheela Reddy* describes, that education is one of the necessary conditions for advancing of life and freedom. As she rightly reminds, secondary education is a decisive stage in the educational hierarchy and an effective link between primary and secondary education. Moreover, it was noted how secondary education can act as a major instrument of social change and development and the rigour of secondary education can enable students to compete successfully in education and jobs, globally and nationally. Referring to some of the major challenges that secondary education faces in India, she stresses the need to discover new ways of ‘knowing’ so as to effectively participate by our youth in the domestic and global processes, and thereby ensure equitable economic and socio-cultural diversity; and the need to concentrate on the marginalised and vulnerable sections of society to promote access and equity and thereby to ensure the larger goal of social justice.

While secondary education is compulsory and free in some countries, a large proportion of children of eligible age group in India still remains deprived of quality secondary education with its far-reaching impact on society. With the help of secondary data, *Madhumita Bandyopadhyay* and *Sunita Chugh* have explained where does India stands in terms of providing quality secondary education and the challenges to be met in the coming years if the RTE Act is to be extended to secondary education of reasonable quality in a diverse and vast country like India. The prerequisites for universal secondary education include, as Bandyopadhyay and Chugh highlight, creation of elaborate physical infrastructure to provide universal access and enable universal participation and ensuring that all children complete elementary education. The country should prepare for the rigour of secondary education. Thirdly, a massive reorientation of secondary education is needed to meet the needs and aspirations of children of diverse backgrounds with different preparatory levels. Many of these children are also first generation learners. It is necessary to pay serious attention to quantitative and qualitative expansion of secondary education. Unfortunately, as of now, the gap is very wide between current availability and the requirements in all these aspects.

Based on valuable NSSO data from 2007 to 2014, *Manabi Majumdar* and *Sangram Mukherjee* show that the participation rate of children in education in India was high till 14 years of age after which it nose-dives, and more so for females than males. About 21% rural youth and 18% urban youth (age group 5–29) did not attend any educational institution. The mean age at first enrolment was similar

across different expenditure (monthly per capita consumption expenditure) quintiles but exits or drop-outs, which the authors like quite a few scholars prefer to refer to as ‘push-out’, happen much earlier in the case of lower strata compared to the upper income groups. Among the factors responsible for the push-out, apart ‘lack of interest’ a factor that needs to be probed in detail, and the financial stress families feel in sending their children to schools, the authors refer to the tendency on the part of the schools to fail students simply because the infrastructure was not adequate to cope with a large number of students. The authors argue that there are strong forces within the education system and its underlying ‘vision’ that tend to work against the egalitarian goal of secondary education for all.

What we observe at the national level with reference to many problems in secondary education, such as low overall enrolments, high enrolments in private schools, major infrastructural gaps in the provisioning of drinking water, functional toilets, proper boundary walls and gates, and facilities of library, computer laboratories, science practical laboratories, etc., shortage of subject teachers, somewhat irrational demand for English medium schools, etc., can be confirmed from field surveys as well. While doing so based on primary and secondary data in a relatively prosperous state of Maharashtra, *Anuradha De* and *Meera Samson* highlight many other issues, including serious governance issues, absence of inspection and monitoring mechanisms, the long distances children have to travel to reach schools in rural areas, non-availability of science and commerce streams of study in schools, and the pressure of private tuitions. Their school survey also showed that while most schools were highly functional, there was wide variation in quality among the several secondary schools. An important factor behind this variation is the multiplicity of bodies involved in the management of government and government-aided private schools. There has been a decline in the number of government and government-aided schools, and unaided self-financing schools are playing an increasingly greater role in the system. Even government-aided schools were seen to start unaided sections in their premises offering subjects which are in demand. The impact of these changes is that enrolment in government and government-aided private schools has been declining and those in private schools increasing. The changing public-private mix has adversely impacted several dimensions of education, and as *Achin Chakraborty* highlights, this has serious implications for the entire education system and the society at large. The lack of investment in public—government and government-aided—schools particularly hurts the prospects of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, as they get forced to make do with schools where quality of teaching and facilities are highly compromised.

The phenomenon of private schools is one of the most dominant aspects of Indian education as it developed over the last three decades. Private schools became an important source of inequality in education. There is massive expansion of private schools and there is heterogeneity and hierarchy as well in its expansion. With the increasing number of low-fee private schools, there is a change in the school choice too, based on the supply side. Further, there is change in the behaviour of the disadvantaged groups and the middle classes too. The shift of middle-class parents in their preference from government to private schools, including specifically low fee private

schools, has shrunk the space for school–community interactions, due to which there is no voice in government schools these days. Of the several factors that influence the school choice in favour of private schools is the paying ability of parents. Students belonging to richer families, urban areas and to the general social (caste) category and boys have greater access to private schools, and the access to private schools is limited for poor children, those from rural areas, Scheduled Castes/Tribes and girls. *Pradeep Choudhury* feels that it is important to examine the growth of the local private school market to understand the micro-phenomenon. He also opined that there is dearth of research on the schooling choices of disadvantaged groups and the people belonging to minorities. It is important to examine who is going to which type of school, and why.

Based on an ethnographic case study of a private school in Odisha, *Amrita Sastry* offers interesting insights into power dynamics that operate in private schools. The aspiring middle class sends their children to private schools because of the latter's quality connotation and their readiness to compromise even their basic needs to meet the educational needs of their children. However, as Sastry observes, education is now commodified as a package and the power dynamics operates in private schools based on the school culture. There is power dynamics in the culture of learning, which enables, isolates or even disables children's learning. Children are considered the lowest rung in terms of power/space and the teachers, the principal, the management, the parents, and others occupy high space in the power ladder. Indeed, the children are regarded as blank slates where people wielding power write their thoughts. Power dynamics also exists between teacher–students and students–students in private schools. We should realise the importance of diffusing the notion of power in the classroom and search for innovative student-centric classroom practices. Unfortunately, as *Manabi Majumdar* observes, our approach to developing the school system in the country is guided by choice-centric view, supply-centric perspective, and curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation centric approach. There is need to change all this.

Quite a few contributions in this book focus on analysing statistically the determinants of participation in secondary schooling. In three separate papers, *Deepak Kumar*, *Susmita Mitra* and *Nivedita Sarkar* analyse using different databases and different methods, determinants of participation or enrolment in and determinants of completion of secondary education in India. While individual, social and school related factors (e.g. distance to school) and many other factors are important in explaining the variations in enrolment rates and in drop-out rates among children, including gender, caste, religion, region (rural or urban), and family-related reasons, family background, parental education, disinterest in education, inability of students to cope up with the curriculum and examinations are important, the most important factor still emerges to be economic in nature, that relates to direct and indirect costs of secondary education (e.g. school fees, books, uniforms, and transportation costs), and opportunity costs of education, reflected in the need to work at home or in the labour market. While it may not be so hard for economically weaker sections of society or minority groups to send their children to primary schools, it becomes significantly harder to send them to secondary education because of direct

and opportunity costs. The consistency with which the correlation between economic status of the households and participation in secondary education, or drop-outs from secondary education, or being out of schools exists, is indeed very striking, similar to the pattern shown earlier by Tilak (2002) in case of literacy and other levels of education. Low economic conditions do not allow families to send their children to secondary/higher secondary education, and inability to become educated, in turn, affects their ability to improve their economic status and to be active partners in national development.

Despite increase in the gross enrolment ratio, the issues of social access and equity remain persistent. Social, gender and income disparities continue to be reflected in gaps in learning levels and drop-out of school. Wide regional variations are reflected in the structure of school education, management, infrastructure facilities, teacher deployment, quality, learning achievements, etc. While quite a few initiatives have been made towards improving secondary education in many states, the system is characterised by weak implementation of educational reforms, ineffective teacher training programmes and the low importance accorded to school leadership. According to Mythili, there were five major leadership factors in the Indian context, which affect the performance of the school system as a whole, namely vision building, goal setting, organisational or school improvement, commitment and goal achieving, and on all fronts there is need for improvement.

There have been significant changes in the labour market in the last two decades which created pressures for skill improvement in India. The question that arises in the present context is how our education system, especially secondary school system, will cope with this requirement. The relevance of linking the skill development with secondary schooling can be viewed in two ways: to reduce the labour search cost in the domestic and international labour markets; and skill development for self-employment and self-sufficiency for rural and urban youth in India, which promotes upward mobility for socially backward classes. Apart from vocational and technical education at school level, and training at post-secondary level institutions, little has been done on promoting skills among youth for a long period. In fact, as *Mona Sedwal* shows, even vocational education programme at secondary level has been elusive; it did not take off well. As per some recent statistics, only 5% of the Indian labour force in the age group of 20–24 has received vocational training. It is difficult to estimate skill shortages. But it is widely known that the skill gap—between demand and supply—is increasing over time. The government of India has launched a major programme of skill development with a target of imparting skill intensive training to 500 million by 2022. The training programmes should impart both ‘general’ and ‘specific’ skills (Becker 1975), while education imparts ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ skills in addition to knowledge. The costs of ‘general’ training need to be met by industry, training for ‘specific’ skills by firms, and costs of education by the state (Tilak 1994). As Sedwal argues, what is needed are innovative solutions for emerging demands, changing of funding mechanism from a supply to a demand-driven model, transfer of public resources on the basis of input or output criteria, a flexible education system, enabling basic education that provides the foundation

for learning, development of core capabilities, and core technical skills in secondary and tertiary education.

Secondary education is expected to provide general and specific skills. As *Bornali Bhandari*, *Charu Jain* and *Ajaya Sahu* argue secondary education should aim at laying the foundations for lifelong learning and human development, by offering foundational skills—general training, as well as subject- or skill-oriented skills (specific training) using more specialised teachers, so that secondary school graduates' employability in labour market and at the same time admissibility in higher education are ensured. In other words, as *Arup Mitra* in a short note describes, improving the quality of education and training and integrating the general education with vocational courses are instrumental in providing strong education that serves both purposes. Universalisation of secondary schooling and provision of skills to youth need to be integrated into one major programme, as there is a big common ground between them. While earlier evidence has not supported such a model of simultaneously providing in the same school academic and vocational education and training under the label of 'diversified school curriculum' (Tilak 1988a, 2003), the changing labour market conditions may as well make it efficient. But both vocational education and secondary general education face serious challenges in India and in many other developing countries, due to rising costs, and inequalities by caste, class and gender.

An important troubling issue in education relates to financing of secondary education. It is often well-acknowledged that public policies and provisioning for secondary education in India have been inadequate. As *Narender Thakur* argues, one of the three prominent challenges secondary education faces in the country is declining government expenditure for education in general and secondary education in particular, the other two challenges being increase in private (household) expenditure in education including secondary education in the poverty driven hierarchical society, and existing and growing social-economic inequalities and exclusions in the school education including especially in secondary education. As all these three are inter-related, expansion of public funding might need to address all the three simultaneously.

Much evidence exists that shows that public expenditure matters; it impacts enrolment and quality of education and that there is a significant positive correlation between public expenditure and several educational indicators (Tilak 1999), including the learning outcomes. As *Pravin Jha* and *Sikdar* tried to show, the poor state of secondary education in the country is closely related to the level and nature of funding of secondary education. Goa, Kerala and Himachal Pradesh have been consistently performing better than all other States with regard to per child expenditure on secondary education and they are doing good in physical outcomes as well, while Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh which finance secondary education at a much lower level have been relatively poor performers. Further, they observed that per student expenditure through the RMSA grants had declined considerably in several states over the last few years. The distribution of RMSA grants favoured the eight States of Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Telangana, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. The shares in grants depended

upon factors like population size, capacity to spend, timely submission of bills etc. Secondary education in including government and government-aided schools in Uttar Pradesh, as *Mohd. Muzammil* shows, critically depends upon grants-in-aid. This is true in case of most other states as well: government-aided private schools depend on government grants; and other sources of revenue for government aided schools (and also government schools) are non-existent (Tilak 2008). Jha and Sikdar favoured use of per student allocation in Kendriya Vidyalayas as a thumb rule marker of 'unit cost'. In 2015–16, per student government expenditure in these schools was approximately Rs. 32,000, while in many states, the corresponding figure is hardly about one third of this. This would considerably ease the financial stress in education. A similar suggestion was made by a Sub-Committee of the CABE (2015) that examined the pathways to improve the conditions of government schools in the country (see also Tilak 2017). As Pravin Jha argues, there is a need to think beyond the possibilities of resources mobilisation which give us political spaces that have not been explored barring the transition to the phase of goods and service tax (GST). He highlights that there is a need first to look for solutions to the challenges of resource mobilisation.

Lastly, the experience of many countries shows that while the design of the policies and their implementation is important, educational policies have been successful where they are backed by strong political will and social commitment, as *Rounaq Jahan* highlights in the concluding chapter of the book, based on her valuable experience in developing countries like Bangladesh. We have quite a bit of rich evidence from many countries that shows how political will and social commitment mattered in transforming and even in revolutionising their education systems, and how countries failed in their educational reforms due to lack of a strong political will (see Tilak 1991, 2001).

This anthology of 20 articles by eminent scholars in the field from all over the country, hopefully serves an important purpose of filling the knowledge gap in case of secondary education in the country, as there are very few studies on secondary education in India. It is hoped that the book will contribute to enhancing the level of public discourses on universal secondary education and at the same time help the policy makers with deep insights into the issues involved.

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