Universal Secondary Education in India—Access, Equity and Social Justice

C. Sheela Reddy

…The vision for secondary education is to make good quality education available, accessible and affordable to all young persons in the age group of 14–18 years…

1 Introduction

The rapid growth of new technologies has led to the development of new skills and competitiveness at the global level. People with higher educational qualifications and nations with a large proportion of educated people, naturally, take advantage of the increasing opportunities from the global economy. Secondary education, a decisive stage in the educational hierarchy, prepares the students for higher education and also for the world of work. Classes IX and X constitute the secondary stage, whereas Classes XI and XII are designated as the higher secondary stage. The normal age group of the children in secondary classes is 14–16 years, whereas it is 16–18 for higher secondary classes (Duraimurugan 2016). States have the responsibility for most of the secondary schools operating in India, with only a small percentage, approximately 5000 Kendriya Vidyalayas (KVs) and 1200 Navodaya Vidyalayas (NVs), falling directly under the central government. The schools are guided and shaped by norms and standards periodically promulgated at different administrative levels.

'Universalisation of elementary education alone will not suffice in the knowledge economy, and a person with mere eight years of schooling is as disadvantaged as an illiterate person' (Planning Commission 2006). Several committees and policy pronouncements highlighted the critical role of secondary education in advancing

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social change and economic development. The resolution, adopted by the Government of India on National Education Policy way back in 1968, affirms that 'educational opportunity at the secondary and higher level is a major instrument of social change and transformation' (GoI 1968). The rigour of the secondary and higher secondary stage enables students to compete successfully in education and jobs, globally. This calls for adequate investment in secondary education to ensure considerable social and economic returns critical for national development. Secondary education needs to be expanded both as a response to increased social demand and as a feeder cadre for higher education. It caters to the most important segment of the population, adolescents and youth, the source of the future human and social capital of a nation.

Universal elementary education (UEE) is being achieved significantly through Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA).The growing number of children in the elementary school system reinforces the need for further education. Secondary education is a link between the elementary and higher education. The future of a child depends a lot on the type of education she/he receives at the secondary level. Secondary education strengthens the roots of a child's education and helps in shaping a bright future. It strengthens children to face emerging challenges in society. Without secondary or senior secondary education, benefits of reservation to SCs/STs will remain elusive. However, the commitment to UEE, the need to supply highly educated manpower to ensure faster growth and industrialisation and increasing demand from the vocal middle classes for more places in higher education to corner the expanding opportunities have relegated secondary education to the margins of public policy (Reddy 2007).

2 Secondary Education in India

The Government of India's intervention in secondary education is, basically, at two levels. Firstly, it is through apex national-level bodies like National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS), Navodaya Vidyalaya Samiti (NVS), Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan (KVS) and Central Tibetan School Administration (CTSA). Secondly, the intervention is through centrally sponsored schemes, such as Scheme of Boarding and Hostel Facilities for Girl students of secondary and higher secondary schools, Integrated Education for Disabled Children, Information and Communication Technology in schools and Quality Improvement in schools.

The Scheme of Boarding and Hostel Facilities for Girl students of secondary and higher secondary schools provides financial assistance to voluntary organisations for running hostels. Preference is given to organisations having hostels in educationally backward districts, particularly those that are predominantly inhabited by SCs/STs and educationally backward minorities. The Scheme of Integrated Education for Disabled Children aims to integrate children and youth, with moderate disabilities, into 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, stationery, uniform, transport, 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. It provides an 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 specified activities.

The centrally sponsored scheme of vocationalisation of secondary education was launched in 1988 to diversify educational opportunities for individual employability, reduce the mismatch between demand and supply of skilled manpower and help those who want to pursue higher education. It was revised in 1992–93 to provide 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, etc (Chaudhari 2016).

Indeed, secondary education is emerging as one of the important policy imperatives across nations. The access to secondary education greatly determines the subsequent life chances (Jeffery and Jeffery 2005). However, the spread of secondary education is not very encouraging. Table 1 shows the growth of enrolment in secondary education by social groups between 1980–81 and 2005–06. The paper presents the data from 1980 onwards to give a fair understanding of the growth of secondary education.

The enrolment of marginal groups in secondary education has grown at a faster rate than the general population. For example, the enrolment of SC/ST girls has grown by more than nine percent per annum as compared to six percent in the case of girls from the general population. Similarly, the enrolment of SC/STs has increased at a higher rate of over six percent per annum compared to a little over five percent in the case of general population. The growth of enrolment is surprising as it tripled during the period—from 11 million to 38.45 million. Similarly, the enrolment of SC/STs also increased by 4.5 and 6.3 times—from 1.2 and 0.3 million to 5.6 and 2.2 million, respectively, during the same period (Prakash 2008).

Table 1 Growth of enrolment at the secondary level (in millions)

Years	Girls	Total	Scheduled Caste girls	Scheduled Caste total	Scheduled Tribe girls	Scheduled Tribe total
1980–81	3.4	11.0	0.25	1.152	0.08	0.33
%	31.9		21.4		25.2	
1990–91	6.3	19.1	0.64	2.238	0.24	0.81
%	33.0		27.2		29.6	
1995–96	8.3	22.9	0.89	2.741	0.36	1.12
%	36.2		32.4		32.0	
2000–01	10.7	27.6	1.39	3.812	0.54	1.49
%	38.8		36.6		35.9	
2003–04	14.4	35.0	1.52	4.760	0.73	1.95
%	41.1		32.0		37.4	
2004–05	15.4	37.1	2.0	5.218	0.80	2.09
%	41.5		38.1		38.1	
2005–06	16.1	38.4	2.18	5.601	0.86	2.21
%	41.9		38.96		38.97	
Growth rate 1980–81 to 2005–06	6.4	5.1	9.1	6.5	9.8	7.9

Source Selected Educational Statistics (various years), Ministry of HRD, New Delhi

Further, India's progress in expanding access to secondary education has been substantial, with the gross enrolment ratio (GER) for both boys and girls having improved considerably. The gap in GER between boys and girls has declined considerably. However, despite increasing participation of girls in secondary education, their overall participation remains lower than that of boys in most States. The GER for boys has increased from 37% in 1995–96 to 72% in 2013–14. In the same period, the GER of girls increased from 24% to around 70% (Fig. 1). Girls' actual enrolment still lags behind boys partly because there are significantly fewer girls in the population. This is an issue not reflected in the GER, which is calculated based on the existing number of school-aged girls in the population. The GER for girls would have been more if female infanticide and sex-selective abortion were not serious continuing issues in India (MHRD 2015).
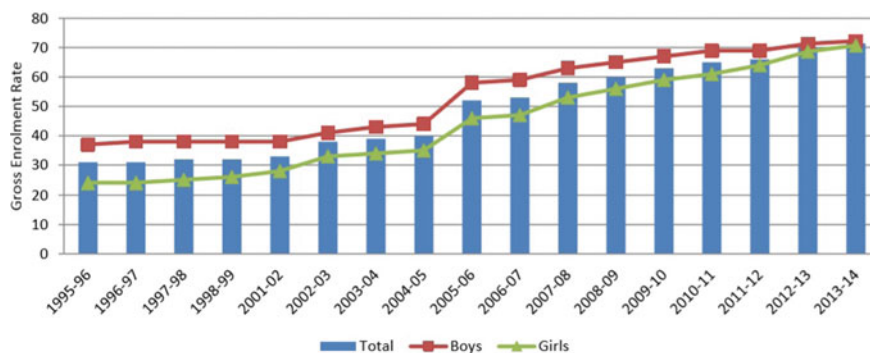
Fig. 1 Growth in gross enrolment ratio by gender. *Source* Selected Education Statistics Various Years

3 Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE) Committee Recommendations

The Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE), the highest deliberative and advisory body relating to policy-making in education in India, provides a platform where the centre and the States/UTs share their common concerns, review their experiences and envision future policies and programmes. A sub-committee of CABE prepared a blueprint for the universalisation of secondary education and submitted its report in June 2005. Some of the major recommendations of the report include:

- The guiding principles of universal secondary education should be universal access, equality and social justice, relevance and development and structural and curricular considerations.
- There have to be norms for schooling. Such norms should be developed for each State with common national parameters as well as State-specific parameters.
- Each State should develop a perspective plan for universal secondary education. In order to prepare a perspective plan, a comprehensive Secondary Education Management Information System (SEMIS) should be developed as early as possible. The SEMIS is for capturing data on girls, SC/ST, OBC, minorities and disabled children.
- Decentralised micro-level planning should be the main approach to planning and implementation of universal secondary education. Block should be the unit for such micro-level planning.
- For universal quality secondary education, the States must avoid softer options of para teachers. The teachers must be fully qualified who should be given full salary.
- Financial requirements for covering the cost of universal elementary and secondary education, which, approximately, accounted for 5.1% of the GDP were considered insufficient and recommended allocation of six percent of the GDP for

education. A progressive increase in this proportion is necessary to move towards universalisation of secondary education (NCERT n.d.).

The Education Commission (1964–66) and the CABE report in 2005 on *Universalisation of Secondary Education* emphasised that quantitative expansion of secondary schools should promote social justice, equity and reduce social exclusion. Accordingly, the targets for USE, as spelt out by the CABE committee, included: universal participation by 2015, universal retention by 2020, mastery learning by more than 60% learners by 2020 and universal higher secondary education (Grades XI–XII) by 2020.

To achieve the goal of providing quality education to all adolescents, i.e. both girls and boys, up to the age of 16 years by 2015 and senior secondary education up to the age of 18 by 2020, a conceptual design, based on four guiding principles, was recommended.

- *Universal Access*: Access to education has to be considered in terms of physical, social, cultural and economic terms in a comprehensive manner. There is a need for a redefinition of some of the basic features of the Indian schools. Disability is a social construct, and it is not enough to solve the problem at the physical level alone, but it demands a change in the mindset of the child's classmates, teachers and the planners of curriculum or textbook authors. In the same way, in the case of a Dalit child, access to education is still a humiliating school experience, which hurts his/her self-confidence.
- *Equality and Social Justice*: Schools should inculcate a sense of equality or social justice among their students or even develop an appreciation of the composite culture and plural character of India. The school system will have to strive for at least six dimensions of equality and social justice to include: gender, economic, social, i.e. SCs/STs, cultural (including the issues of religious and linguistic diversity), disability (both physical and mental) and rural–urban. All these dimensions need to be reflected with sensitivity in the curriculum to build the self-esteem of each child.
- *Relevance and Development*: The education should help in unfolding the full potential of the child. It must link the development of child with the society and its political, productive and socio-cultural dimensions. The parents, while sending their children to schools, have an expectation that their children face the world with confidence. Learning should ensure a child's access to global knowledge and challenges.
- *Structural and Curricular Aspects*: The National Focus Group on 'Work and Education', constituted by NCERT, for reviewing and revising the curriculum framework submitted its report in April 2005. It recommended that, to integrate 'world of work' meaningfully with the 'world of knowledge', curricular reforms need to be linked with structural reforms for the entire school education, including secondary education. This can also make vocational education a significant and effective programme (NCERT n.d., pp. 2–5).

4 Purview of Secondary Education

There is a need to make the participation of the marginalised sections of society inclusive and provide them access to secondary education. This necessitates recognising the rising levels of democratic consciousness and social aspirations of the young people in the age group of 14–18 years. The focus, more specifically, should be on the deprived sections of society, including girls and the disabled, having a greater share in the nation's political, social and techno-economic life.

4.1 Education for Adolescents

The ages from 14–16 to 16–18 are the years of adolescence, late adolescence and the years of transition. These are also said to be the most crucial years of life as there are fast and steady changes in the body structure transforming to adult form that is accompanied by emotional change and maturity. Secondary education, essentially, has to be the education of the adolescence. Experiences in schooling should be responsive to the needs of transition and stabilisation. This is the time when the children are likely to transit from education to the world of work. Secondary education must foster skills of transition.

4.2 Education for Multiple Intelligences

It is necessary for universal secondary education to offer adequate opportunities for bringing out the full potential of each and every student. Secondary education has to nurture the differential intelligences and multiple talents, which may be sports, music, academics or any other field that children bring with them to the school. It has been observed many times that a child who is very good in sports is ridiculed for scoring low marks in mathematics or science. Children with intelligence other than mathematical-logical intelligence are considered as less intelligent. Such an impression makes children totally lose their confidence and self-esteem.

4.3 Universal, Free and Compulsory Education

With the 86th amendment of the Constitution, elementary education for children of the age group of 6–14 years has been made universal, free and compulsory. The CABE committee had a view that secondary education should be universal, i.e. there should be universal access and opportunity for all children to receive secondary education. It kept 2020 as the target for universal enrolment with full retention and

mastery learning in all kinds of learning tasks by more than 60% learners. Also, it hoped that by 2020, there will be provision for universal senior secondary education and universal retention (NCERT n.d., p. 21).

The CABE committee held that there is no point in expanding secondary education in its current form and structure. For achieving the mission of quality schooling for all, the concept of secondary education has to be conceptualised as education of the adolescents in transition, for nurturing multiple intelligence and capabilities. The concepts and structures of the curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and evaluation of the student, etc., have to be redesigned. The committee recommended a culture shift in secondary education.

5 Equity in Access and Learning Through Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA)

Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA), launched in 2009, an initiative of the Government of India in partnership with State governments, sought to universalise enrolment in Grades IX and X across India. It supports the upgradation of the existing schools, the building of new schools to reach unreached areas, investments in quality improvement and contributions to recurrent costs. Its goal was to universalise entry into secondary school by the end of 2017 and achieve universal completion of Grade X by 2020. The revised target is 75% by 2017. It was realised that the achievement of this goal would reduce the gap between India and other BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) countries, where universal access to secondary school has already been a reality for around two decades. It strongly felt that investment in human capital would increase international competitiveness (Lewin n.d.). Specifically, the RMSA aimed at maintaining standards in secondary education by making schools conform to the prescribed norms related to physical facilities, staff and academic matters, universalising physical access to all young people (taking a distance norm of five km at secondary and seven kms at higher secondary stages). It also expected to improve participation and retention in secondary education, overcome barriers to secondary schooling due to gender, socio-economic status, disability and other disadvantaged circumstances and enhance intellectual, social and cultural learning to ensure quality of learning outcomes.

RMSA, the most important programme of the Ministry of Human Resource Development, has been designed as a country-wide reforms programme. It aimed to achieve a GER of 100% by 2017 and universal retention by 2020. The ratio of funding pattern of RMSA between the centre and the State governments is 75:25. In the north-eastern states, the centre meets 90% of the funding requirements. RMSA seeks to improve access and quality of education for the girl child in secondary and higher secondary classes. It also ensures that girl students are not denied the opportunity to continue their education due to distance from school, financial constraints and societal factors. The scheme of Inclusive Education for Disabled at Secondary Stage (IEDSS), which

was launched in 2009-10, is also part of RMSA. The scheme provides assistance to enable all students with disabilities who have completed eight years of elementary schooling to pursue a further four years of secondary schooling from Class IX to XII. RMSA, with its specific focus on removing disabilities, has opened up opportunities for children who are not able to enrol themselves in the formal education system through the modality of national and State open schools and by utilising contact centres and multi-media packages.

The report of the Committee for Evolution of the New Education Policy 2016 states that with the rapid expansion of the school system, access to school education has become near universal. The gaps in average enrolments between the general population and specific disadvantaged groups like the girl child, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, minorities and children with special needs have decreased quantitatively. However, issues of social access and equity remain complex and need to be resolved. The social and income disparities continue to be reflected in gaps in learning levels, which remain large and seem to be growing. Children from historically disadvantaged and economically weaker sections of society exhibit significantly lower learning outcomes and tend to fall behind and are likely to drop out of school. Effective interventions to bridge the gender and social gaps have to be worked out for inclusion and participation of girls and other special category children. Despite the rise in demand for secondary education and increase in the number of schools, its spread throughout the country remains uneven. Regional disparities continue, as do differences in access, depending on the socio-economic background of the students (GoI 2016).

6 Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), 2017

The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), 'Beyond Basics' 2017, highlights the sad state of education, when it comes to India's 14–18 year olds and raises pertinent questions which policy practitioners need to address. The previous ASER reports observed that even with high enrolment ratios of over 96% in the primary education sector, improvement in reading outcomes and arithmetic ability continues to be low. Moreover, a large proportion of students in both government and private schools continue to be below the 'Grade level' (i.e. a student who is able to deal with what is expected of him/her in that grade).

The ASER is targeted to look at the age group, between 14 and 18 years, comprising primarily those outside the Right to Education ambit and on the verge of entering adulthood. The government's flagship RMSA, launched in 2009 and re-booted in 2013 as RMSA-Integrated, has not been much of a success in India's secondary education scene, though enrolment rates have been high and increasing as in the primary education sector. The Right to Education (RTE) Act provides mandatory and free schooling up to the age of 14, or roughly corresponding to Class VIII. ASER surveys show that enrolment in Class VIII has
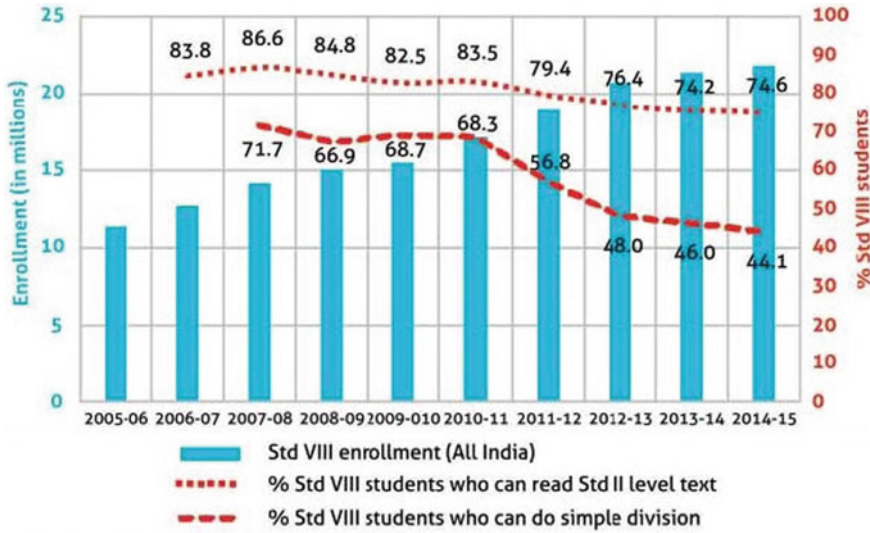
Fig. 2 Ability of Class VIII students consistently falling over the years, coinciding with the increase in enrolment rates. *Source* Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), 2017

been steadily increasing from less than 50% in 2005–06 to close to 90% in 2014–15. However, the quality of education still remains a concern. In Fig. 2, ASER's statistics have shown how the ability of class VIII students has been consistently falling over the years, coinciding with the increase in enrolment rates (Ghosh and Bandyopadhyay 2017).

The latest Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) findings show that, while 86% of adolescents are enrolled in the formal education system, only 53% of all 14-year-olds can read a simple text in English and just 44% can perform a simple division. As a result, the enrolment numbers drop and many do not even complete Class X. The Government's National Achievement Survey (NAS) of 2014 found that only 16% of Class X students, across all types of schools, could correctly answer more than half the mathematics questions put to them. Children are, thus, being sent to schools but not really educated. Lessons are being taught but not learnt. Digital India sends most of its children to high schools without access to computer laboratories or even libraries. Learning becomes a second-order problem when basic facilities are lacking. The elementary education experience clearly demonstrates that inputs and infrastructure are essential but not, in themselves, sufficient to improve quality. The transition from schooling to learning is far more complicated (Kapur 2018).

It is significant to observe the way enrolment rates decline after standard VIII, or once students are no longer under the purview of the RTE Act. If we have a look at the 2011–12 Grade VIII cohorts, the findings show that there is about a one-third decline until Grade XII, indicative of a trend of increasing drop-out rates after Grade VIII. The same trend is reflected when enrolment rates are analysed by age, showing a steady increase of youth not enrolled from age 14–18 years, as shown in Fig. 3 (Kapur 2018).
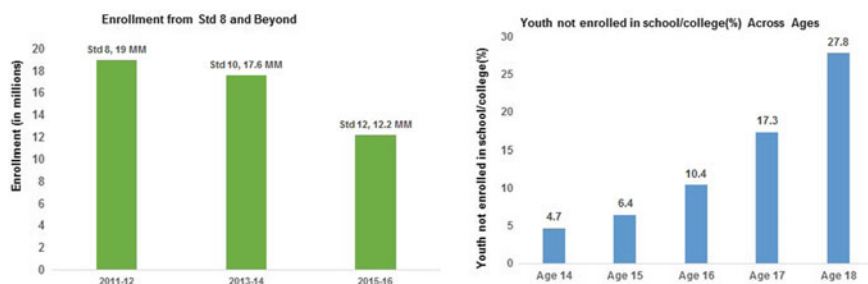
Fig. 3 Enrolment rates after Standard 8. *Source* Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), 2017

A surprising fact is that about 17% of students dropped out because they failed in their studies. The current government policy does not allow schools to fail students until Standard VIII. The ASER report points out that while the intention of the policy is commendable, there need to be measures in place to identify and focus on students who have lagged behind in the earlier grades. It is due to the policy of not failing students that the students left behind are not identified until they end up failing exams after Grade VIII. Despite the fall in enrolment rates, over 86% of youth in the 14–18 years age range continue to be within the formal education system. Only about five percent take some type of vocational training, which is of mostly less than three months' duration. A substantial proportion of youth in this age group is employed, irrespective of whether they are engaged in formal education or not. Overall, 42% of the youth is employed, including 39% of students engaged in formal education and 60% of students who have dropped out (Kapur 2018).

The ASER report noticed a visible gender divide in learning deficit. The statistics show that while 47.1% boys in the 14–18 age group could do simple division (dividing a 3-digit number by a single digit), only 39.5% girls could do the same (Vishnu 2018). The findings of RMSA report 2015 also project differences in gender disparities among States. The participation of girls in secondary education has increased since the 1990s but still varies widely from State to State. Large disparities remain in some States. Thus, Bihar (58% boys), Gujarat (59% boys), MP (62% boys), Rajasthan (61% boys) and UP (58% boys) have many more boys than girls enrolled in Grades IX and X. In contrast, Tamil Nadu (51% boys), Kerala (51% boys), Karnataka (51% boys), Meghalaya (49% boys) and Mizoram (50% boys) are close to gender parity. The patterns are complex and vary with location and social group. Gender equity remains an issue in relation to enrolment, especially for the poorest. In some States, it is also an issue in terms of the numbers of girls in the child population as a result of selective abortion and infanticide (MHRD 2015).

7 Universal Secondary Education: Challenges and Way Forward

India is emerging as the fastest growing economy in the world for which the success largely depends upon human resource development. The quality and relevance of the secondary education curriculum have to address the needs of both, viz. those who want to go in for higher education and those wanting to enter the labour market. The curriculum is expected to equip the students with adequate cognitive skills to deal with complex situations in daily routine and also in the world of work. The teaching methods and the transaction of curriculum in classroom ought to focus on learning to learn than on familiarising and memorising facts (Reddy 2007).

Regular assessments can serve as checkpoints to assess absorption and assimilation. Teaching must be modified to student needs, instead of serving government mandates on curriculum. There is a need for close monitoring, and classroom interactions must be enhanced. The teachers need to cater to the needs of an increasingly diversifying student community. As far as systemic institutional reform is concerned, the management and planning structures must be strengthened to ensure that the objectives are changed from curriculum completion to learning. The planning and budgeting system should focus on school needs and increasing flexibility in spending, with emphasis on quality education (Kapur 2018).

There is a need to undertake the school mapping exercise with a view to ensure the requirements of the existing schools and opening of new ones. Equity concerns in terms of gender, social groups and minority communities have a bigger dimension at the secondary stage. As free and compulsory education to all children up to 14 years of age is the Constitutional provision in India, many efforts are being made to realize the goal of UEE. The secondary schooling facilities, though improved to a significant level, have few areas of concern, as they are not available to a large number of habitations. Government schools have lower percentage of buildings than the schools under private management. All types of schools, including unaided private schools, must contribute towards universalisation of secondary education by ensuring adequate enrolments for the children from under-privileged sections of society and those belonging to below poverty line families (Chaudhari 2016, p. 304).

It is imperative to think of appropriate secondary schooling model in terms of objectives and functions and diversify secondary education to accommodate the growing social demand for quality schooling. It is important to increase access to schooling while maintaining quality and equity. The limits of trade-off between quality, quantity and equity in developing secondary education need to be clearly laid down. The implications of uniform provisioning and mixed market providers, i.e. private participation, in terms of coverage and equity as far as schooling is concerned, must be considered objectively. It is necessary to think in terms of appropriate curriculum and evaluation system in order to prepare pupils simultaneously for workplace, pursue higher education and equip them in life with high levels of relevance and external efficiency. The mode of financing secondary education that is sustainable and affordable has to be worked out (Biswal 2011).

8 Conclusion

The importance of secondary education and higher secondary education cannot be under-estimated. The investments made in secondary education also have to be size-able and strategic. Planning for secondary education should involve both national and state governments. The centre needs to encourage and enable States to comprehen-sively plan for secondary education reform, focussing on areas such as access, equity, quality and so on. Instead of the centre deciding on a plan for developing particular areas of secondary education in the States, the 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. The centre could also develop a range of technical resources, which the States could draw upon, depending on the focus and needs defined in their plans. India takes pride in a sizeable 'demographic dividend'. However, the basic skill gaps in young population need to be addressed appropriately to make secondary education universal in terms of access and equity. Equity refers to the principle of fairness and often used interchangeably with the related principle of equality. Equity is the process/means and equality is the outcome/end. Access is an opportunity or the method and possibility of getting near to the desired thing. Equity through equality can guarantee access, thereby ensuring social justice.

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