

*Achieving Quality in Education Under SDG 4 - Financial Challenges and Gaps
from an Indian Perspective*

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Abstract

India has shown significant progress in increasing the literacy levels of children in both primary and elementary education. Consistent efforts are being made to enhance enrolment rate, retention and attendance of students to truly universalise education in India. The country still faces many issues in education sector ranging from gender inequality to quality of content being imparted. This paper aims to review the status of education in India, particularly in light of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Number 4. This goal aims to promote inclusive education for all with a focus on equity and quality. India is a very important stakeholder in SDGs and therefore, it is relevant to study the current education policies and programmes of the Government and analyse whether they are aligned with the international goals. This paper also discusses upcoming trends in education like the Draft National Education Policy, 2019 (NEP), which is being projected as an important step to align Indian education sector with SDG Goal 4. The paper uses secondary sources of data, which includes government data, research articles, independent studies and institutional reports. This paper identifies some critical gaps and challenges still existing in education sector such as inadequate resources, budget constraints, lack of basic infrastructure, low teacher recruitments and gender discriminatory practices. Lastly, some suggestions are proposed to solve the issues identified.

Keywords: India, Sustainable Development Goals, Inclusive Education, Equity, National Education Policy

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1. Introduction

In year 1992, the “Earth Summit” was held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and “Agenda 21” was adopted by more than 178 countries (UN, 2020), which proved to be a watershed event for all humanity. This agreement laid the roadmap to create a sustainable and better future for the entire world. It was followed by the ‘Millennium Summit’ in the year 2000, where eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were adopted to improve human development parameters by 2015. These initiatives subsequently culminated with the adoption of ‘The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’, in form of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to improve human lives and protect the environment at the same time. Among these SDGs, Goal 4 relates to education titled as “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (UN, 2015). This goal is further divided into seven targets and three sub-targets, which can broadly be categorized into five groups namely gender equality, youth and adult literacy, life-skill learning for sustainable development and improving educational infrastructure (Panmei & Kumar, 2018). Being cross-linked in nature, these are complemented by other SDGs like Goal 3 Target 3.7 (health and well-being), Goal 5 Target 5.6 (gender equality) and Goal 8 Target 8.6 (decent work and sustainable growth), etc. (SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee, 2020). Together, all these targets have been designed to increase the access and quality of education in countries, while also making it equitable.

India is a key stakeholder in this global partnership of 193 countries. With more than one billion people, it is part of the world’s emerging economies which account for highest proportion of poorest communities (Wada Na Todo Abhiyan, 2017, p. vii). Even though India has shown a remarkable progress in economic growth, becoming the fifth largest economy in the world (current prices) (IMF, 2020), its performance is lagging in human development indices, particularly education and health, and still remains home to 28 percent of the world’s ‘multidimensional’ poor people (UNDP, 2019). About a third of India’s population is in the age bracket of 15-34 years (GOI, 2017, p. 3), thus, bolstering the importance of education for a sustainable growth in the country. Therefore, it is critical that India takes all the necessary measures to improve its current global rank of 115 in the SDG Index (Sachs, Schmidt-Traub, Kroll, Lafortune, & Fuller, 2019, p. 21) and ensures that they are achieved by 2030.

Government of India is implementing many policy interventions to achieve the targets set out in SDG 4. By roping in private players like NGOs and civil society groups, it has consistently tried to increase the reach and quality of education. Programmes such as *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA) (or Campaign for Universal Education), along with its schemes like National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary level (NPEGEL) and *Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya* (KGBV), have shown a significant impact in improving girls’ education at elementary level. Similarly, other interventions such as passing of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009 (hereafter RTE) (which made free education a fundamental right), Mid-Day meal scheme (which provisions for nutritious meal to children studying in classes I to VIII) and a nation-wide umbrella National Education Mission, have helped India improve its performance in some parameters of education like gender parity, youth and adult literacy and teacher training. India is committed to achieve the targets under SDG 4, which is evident from the recently published Draft National Education Policy (NEP), 2019. The details of this policy will be discussed

later in this paper, however to point out briefly, a major difference between the new draft versus the previous NPE 1986/92 is that the new proposed policy has been realigned to match SDGs and highest priority has been accorded to the task of ensuring universal access to education, removing gender disparity and focusing on quality education and learning outcomes (GOI, 2019, p. 27).

One important issue with respect to India’s education sector versus the aims of SDG-4 stems out from the concerns regarding the quality of education being imparted in schools and the lack of adequate financial resources allocated to the programmes and schemes. Education is listed in the concurrent list of the Indian Constitution, meaning that both Centre and State have responsibility towards it. While majority of the expenditure on education is made by States, the Centre plays its role by allocating funds under Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSS) and grants-in-aid. It has been often pointed out that the social sector expenditure at the State level has not risen significantly. Specifically, for the health and education parameters, the expenditure has risen only in 9 States in the current decade (2010-11 to 2017-18) versus 1990’s (Mate, et al., 2018). With quite ambitious targets set for education sector in SDGs, India needs to sort these issues if it really wants to achieve them by 2030. This paper first discusses the progress made by India related to SDG-4 and then highlights the financial challenges and gaps in the present system. Finally, some suggestions are proposed to address these genuine concerns.

2. Progress in making education inclusive and equitable in India

Unlike MDGs, the SDGs went through a process of extensive consultations. Even though some critics, like Unterhalter (2019), have raised objections about the inadequacy of the metrics used to measure the targets, they are mostly accepted to be fair to the overall objective of sustainability. In order to get a holistic understanding about why SDG Goal 4 is so critically important, it will be useful to know some facts about the status of sustainable education at the global level. These are presented in Table 1 below (UNESCO, 2017-18, pp. xvi-xvii):

Table 1: Monitoring SDG 4 at Global Level (Some Facts)

Target	Status
Target 4.1: Primary and Secondary Education	About 387 million children of primary school age, or 56%, did not reach the minimum proficiency level in reading.
Target 4.2: Early Childhood	Just 17% of countries legally stipulate at least one year of free and compulsory early childhood education.
Target 4.3: Technical, Vocational, Tertiary and Adult Education	Very few adults who have not completed primary education go back to school.
Target 4.4: Skills for Work	Most adults in low- and middle-income countries do not have even basic computer skills.
Target 4.5: Equity	Only 66% of countries have achieved gender parity in primary education, 45% in lower secondary and 25% in upper secondary
Target 4.6: Literacy and Numeracy	The adult literacy rate is below 60% in low income countries.
Target 4.7: Sustainable Development and	In 2009-2012, only 7% of teacher education programmes covered education for sustainable development.

Global Citizenship	
Target 4.A: Education Facilities And Learning Environments	In half of 148 countries, less than three-quarters of primary schools had access to drinking water.
Target 4.B: Scholarships	Aid spending on scholarships decreased by 4% to US\$ 1.15 billion from 2010 to 2015.
Target 4.C: Teachers	Globally, 86% of teachers are trained at the primary school level.

Source: UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report: Accountability in Education, 2017/18

From the above table it is evident that much more needs to be done to make education truly sustainable. This is not surprising considering how vast and multi-layered this issue is. It also gives us a perspective that being the second most populated country of the world, India naturally faces more complexities and will require sustained efforts in the direction of quality education. India has made significant progress in the area of enrolment in schools and female participation up to secondary school level (GOI, 2018, p. i). In 2019, the net primary enrolment rate was 92.3% and the lower secondary completion rate stood at 85.9% (Sachs, Schmidt-Traub, Kroll, Lafortune, & Fuller, 2019, p. 233). The national literacy rate (age 5 and above) was 76% with male literacy rate at 83.6% and female literacy rate a little lower at 68.1% (GOI, 2018). Although the country has seen an improvement in literacy rates, however, the national rate remains lower than the global average of 84% (UNESCO, 2016).

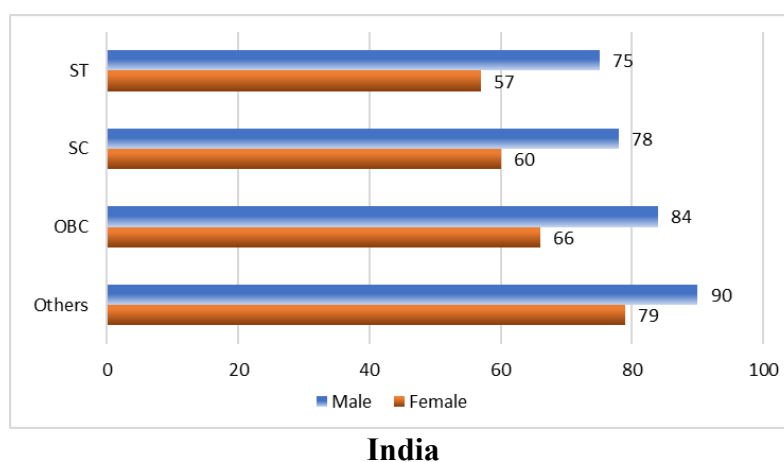
Government of India has given highest priority to address the challenges in the education sector (Panmei & Kumar, 2018). NITI Aayog (which is the national think tank of the government) is the primary agency, which is responsible for ensuring co-ordination among various Ministries and Departments (Jain, 2018). It has selected many priority indicators in its Three-Year Action Agenda (2017-18 to 2019-20) for monitoring the implementation of schemes and periodic meetings are held at State and National level to make sure that a common direction is being followed. Further, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MOSPI) has collaborated with NITI Aayog to come out with a National Indicator Framework (NIF) in 2016, which forms the backbone of all monitoring plans for SDGs and gives key data inputs to policy makers for further calibration (GOI, 2016). The progress relating to SDG Goal 4 in India can be discussed as per the key words of the goal i.e. inclusive, equity and quality.

2.1 Inclusive Education

There are three groups which have been given focus to make education in India more inclusive – marginalized, adults and differently-abled children. As discussed above, RTE Act, 2009, was a paradigm shift to make education inclusive. Not only it guarantees free and compulsory education for all, it also reserves one-fourth of the seats in private schools for children from Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) of the society, thereby bringing children from marginalized sections like Schedule Tribes, migrants and disabled into the mainstream (Pandey, 2018). To increase adult literacy in the country, the government runs a national scheme called *Saakshar Bharat Programme* (SBP) (earlier called National Literacy Mission). More than 19 million adults (age group 15 and above) benefitted from this programme in the year 2016-17

(GOI, 2018, p. 7). To make education inclusive for differently-abled children (or children with special needs), India ratified the UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2007 and also passed a landmark legislation called ‘Rights of Persons with Disability Act, 2016’ (RPD Act) (Jindal, 2016). As per Census report, 2.2% of the Indian population is disabled out of which about 45% is illiterate (GOI, 2011), which roughly translates to more than 13 million people. Government of India aims to make education inclusive for them through specific components like Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS) and Alternative and Innovative Education (AIE) under *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (Singal, 2009). Graph 2.1 below depicts the percentage of literates (age 7 years and above) by social group in India (GOI, 2014):

Graph 2.1: Percentage of literates (age 7 years and above) by social group in

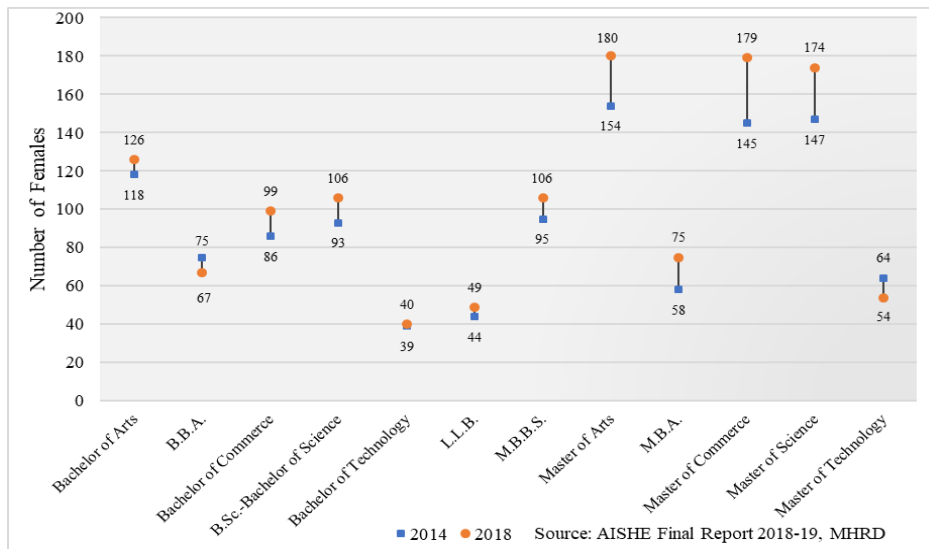


Source: NSSO 71st Round (January – June, 2014), page 21

2.2 Equitable Education

Equity in education is often linked to the concept of gender parity in schools and colleges. India has made very good progress in increasing the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) and Gender Parity Index (GPI) over the previous decade (Panmei & Kumar, 2018). This has been made possible by various initiatives such as residential schools and hostel facilities, free textbooks and uniforms, nutritious food in schools, financial aids, improvement in infrastructure, mass media campaigns, etc. All these efforts have resulted in improving the GER of both boys and girls, with the best results visible at primary level of education. As per a survey, India has achieved a GPI of more than 1.0 till senior secondary level, although inequality exists in private versus government schools, where parents tend to prefer sending boys to the former and girls to the latter (GOI, 2018, p. ii). Another way of analysing equity in education is by looking at the participation of females in fields which are traditionally considered to be “male-oriented”. From the data available for higher education, it is seen that females outnumber males in undergraduate and graduate courses such as arts and education and their number has been steadily growing in non-traditional fields like science and commerce also (GOI, 2018-19). Graph 2.2 below represents this trend in regular mode of higher education.

Graph 2.2: Female per 100 Male Students in important Programmes at Under-Graduate & Post-Graduate Level in Regular mode of Education (year 2018 vs



2014)

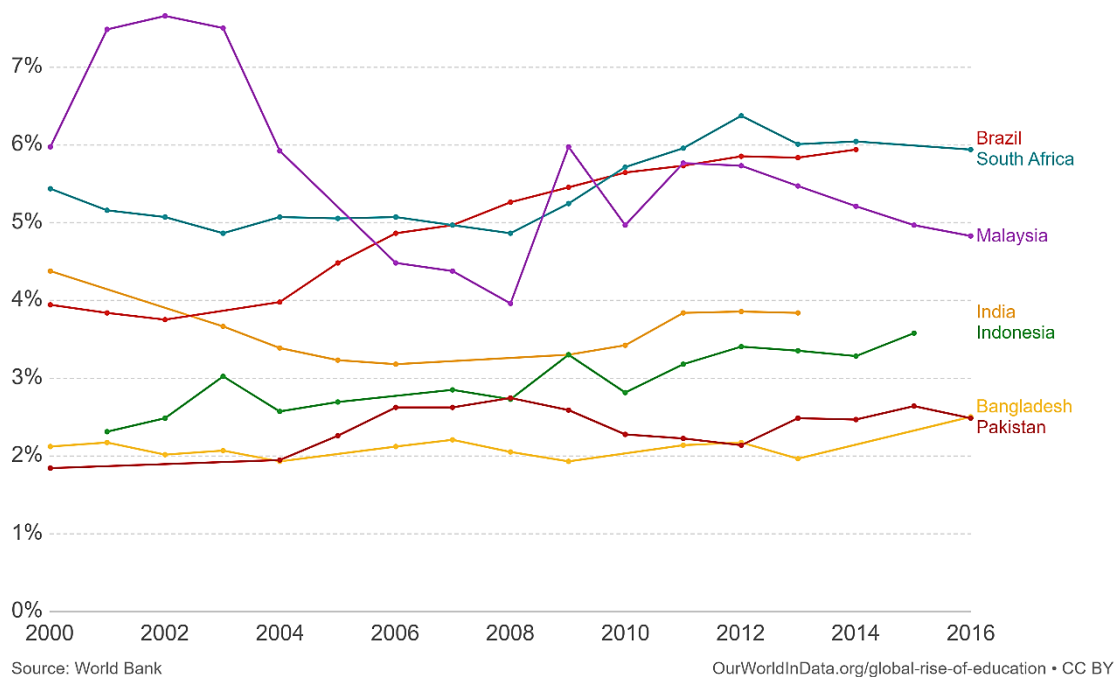
2.3 Quality Education

The subject of quality education is assessed in terms of learning outcomes, teacher quality and infrastructure quality. India has struggled in all these areas with most studies pointing out that even though there has been progress over the years, much remains to be desired for (Kingdon, 2007). *Pratham*, an educational NGO, in its annual survey has found that 1 out of 4 children in rural India pass eight standard without basic reading skills, although this figure is decreasing every year (ASER, 2018). There are many measures taken by the Government to address this problem. To improve the quality of teacher training a National Teacher Platform (named *Diksha*) has been launched in 2017, which forms a part of the National Mission on Teachers and Teaching launched in 2014 (GOI, 2018). A lot of focus is being given to learning and development through Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for both students and teachers. Further, there have been periodic reviews in the grading system for students under the ambit of RTE Act to increase performance. At the higher education level, Ministry of Human Research and Development (MHRD) is promoting quality in research through incentives such as fellowships and scholarships.

3. Challenges and gaps in the present system

A lot has been discussed above about the progress made by India in line of SDG Goal 4. Most experts agree that the targets of this goal are quite ambitious and India faces many challenges in its path to achieve it (Mate, et al., 2018). The biggest challenges that it faces is related to the inadequate financial resources allocated by the Government to education sector. According to a report by Bhamra, Shanker, & Niazi (2015), out of the estimated finance of USD 2258 billion required for SDG Goal 4, there exists a gap of at least USD 740 billion, which has not been allocated in the budget till date. This gets co-related by the analysis of the annual government expenditure on education in terms of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which is presented in Graph 3.1 below (World Bank, 2017):

Graph 3.1: Country-wise Government Expenditure on Education as Percentage



of GDP

The above graph shows that in the year 2014, India spent less than 4% as a percentage of its GDP on education, which is quite low as compared to some other similar low middle-income countries. This is low even when compared to the suggestions of many committees like Kothari Commission (1966), which suggested that it should be a minimum of 6% of GDP. India is one of the largest economies of the world and has the financial capacity to spend more on education to improve education quality. However, at the global level, India’s spending on education is quite less than the OECD countries, which shows in its rank of 62 (total public expenditure on education per student) and a consequent negative impact on its world talent ranking where it ranks 59th among 63 countries (IMD, 2019). Thus, even though the government boasts of keeping education as one of its top priorities, it does not get reflected in the allocation of resources for the same.

Another critical challenge related to financial resources is the wide gap in planning between Centre and States. As mentioned above, the responsibility for promoting education is of both the Central and State Governments. However, most States in the country are spending much less on each student. As per the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Act, local governments must get enough funds to prepare plans and budgets as per the need of the local people. The data available shows that this is not happening and as a result local government are not empowered enough to take meaningful steps. This is important because without the active participation of local governments, the Central government cannot expect to reach the grassroot level for fulfilling the targets of SDG Goal 4. This also gets reflected in the way SDGs are being monitored at the State/Local level. While NITI Aayog is the co-ordinating agency at the national level, the State Planning Departments and Boards are responsible for collating the data at the local level. But very few States have created the necessary system (which includes policies, trained manpower, monitoring

parameters, human resources, etc.) to which can match the requirements of the new task. The national auditor of India in its detailed performance audit on implementation of RTE Act highlighted “mismatch of unspent balances at the end of the year with opening balances of succeeding years, short release of funds and retention of huge balances by state governments, and non-adherence to expenditure norms.” (CAG, 2017). Weak monitoring of outcomes of schemes and programmes affects the feedback necessary to re-calibrate the existing policies.

Inadequacy of financial resources has an impact on all components of education like toilets, classrooms, teachers, training and scholarships. A study of 12 States found out that all of them required more classrooms ranging from 15% to 75% and also more teachers with some States having only 47% teachers against the required number (Bose, Sardana, & Ghosh, 2017). Without necessary budgetary support this gap will be hard to bridge. Spending on education by State governments has been low with most states allocating less resources than required. Another angle to this is the ever-rising enrolment in private schools. While this is not a bad trend per se, it is a problem in India where high income inequalities exist thereby meaning that poor people cannot afford the relatively better-quality private schools. Therefore, unless State governments increase their spending ratio, government schools will not be attractive making good education a rich-man’s privilege.

More insights about spending on education is obtained when it is analysed from segmented level. From the data available, it is seen that out of the 3.87% expenditure as %GDP in 2013-14, the national government spent 1.63% on elementary education, 0.96% on secondary education, 0.69% on higher education and 0.58% on technical education (GOI, 2014). The minuscule amount spent on university education is in stark contrast to the SDG target for providing work-skills to students, which will enable them to get jobs in future. This also affects the quality of research work and technical knowledge imparted, which has a negative impact on the entrepreneurship environment in the country. One is not surprised when it is reported that India produces a lot of ‘paper-degree’ holders, implying that graduate have degrees but not enough skills, rendering them unemployable.

Though, India has attained high GER at primary and elementary level, it performs poorly at the higher education level with GER of males being only 25.4% and of females being 23.5% in 2015-16 (GOI, 2018). At the disaggregated level, many States lack behind even at the secondary level and their performance worsens as the level of education rises. Enrolment rate per se, is not a true measure of education and therefore, it is necessary to analyse other parameters such as pass-out percentage. Graph 3.2 below shows the pass percentage of students at various levels of education:

Graph 3.2: Percentage Pass-Out at various levels of Education in India



Source: Department of School Education and Literacy, 2015-16 (for 10th and 12th)
Department of Higher Education, 2018-19 (for UG, PG and Ph. D)

As seen from the above graph, the pass-out percentages are satisfactory in 10th and 12th class, but extremely poor at the undergraduate, post-graduate and post doctorate level. This implies that India needs to step-up its efforts to increase the quality of education being imparted. This is further emphasized by reports which show that at the All-India level (rural), only 50.1% boys and 44.1% girls (age group 14-16) can do division (ASER, 2018). Naturally, if the foundation of students is weak, they will not perform at the higher levels resulting in higher drop-out rate or 'Never-Enrolment Rate'.

Another area of gap in education sector with respect to SDG Goal 4 is seen in infrastructure of institutions. There are only 993 Universities, 39,931 Colleges and 10,725 Stand Alone Institutions in India (GOI, 2018-19). With a huge young population looking to get formal degrees, this means increasing the batch size, which affects the Pupil-to-Teacher (PTR) ratio. Some states in India like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Jharkhand have a PTR of more than 50 reflecting the shortage of colleges and schools for students. In terms of facilities, it is seen that even though most schools have toilet and drinking water facilities now, maintenance issues like their cleanliness and hygiene exist making them unusable for students.

With respect to inclusion and equity, despite the availability of numerous laws, there exists a lack of consistency between States and Department about how to implement them. For instance, in the case of Children with Disabilities (CWD), many States have yet not implemented the provisions of *Samagra Shiksha Abhiyaan*, which is a national scheme with legal safeguards for CWD. As per some reports, over 28% CWD (age 6-13 years) are out of school in India (UNESCO, 2019). Similarly, gender disparities still exist in society due to which boys are given better education (e.g. private schooling) as against girls (government schooling). Yet another dimension to education are the cross-linked issues of health like early-childhood care and malnutrition. India ranked 102 out of 117 countries in the Global Hunger Index (GHI, 2019), which means a significant proportion of young children do not get adequate nutrition consequently impacting their performance in studies also.

Lastly, many concerns exist at the level of teachers in terms of their numbers and teaching skills. As per the estimates of the Government itself, there was a shortage of more than 900,000 teachers at the end of 2016 (GOI, 2018), even though independent reports place this at a higher value. The number of female teachers per 100 male teachers is only 73 (GOI, 2018-19), which has been found to be one of the reasons for female drop-outs from schools. At the individual State level, problem is not always about shortage but also of surplus teachers, pointing out the poor resource management techniques. Further, in terms of the teaching methods, most universities and colleges still follow the obsolete rote-learning approach, which does not leave room for innovation and creativity. Non-disbursement of salaries to teachers is a major cause of teacher absenteeism.

4. Emerging Trends in Education in India

It has been discussed above that India has made SDG Goal 4 as a national priority and is taking many steps to solve the challenges and gaps in the present system. Most recent among these is the Draft National Education Policy (NEP) proposed by MHRD in 2019, seeking public comments before finalization. In many aspects, this is the first time a new comprehensive policy has been laid out by the government since 1986 when the first NEP was laid out. This policy explicitly mentions aligning the national direction in line with SDG 4 “to bring quality of life to its citizens in a sustainable way, without degrading the environment.” (GOI, 2019, p. 27). NEP, 2019 seeks to address the issues of equity, access, quality and inclusiveness in education sector in India. For instance, to improve Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), the policy recommends that besides improving the content and pedagogy, pre-primary education must be made mandatory for the whole country. To improve the performance of students, it recommends changes in the course structure like introducing semester system and choice-based credit system in schools. With regards to the issue of poor infrastructure, NEP 2019 proposes a dynamic solution of bringing small and fragmented schools of different levels into a single complex, which will ease management and allocation of resources. The policy also proposes that teachers should be retained in one school for at least 5 years and must not be allowed to participate in non-teaching works during school hours. Further, new measures are proposed to improve their training and accountability. In the higher education level, NEP 2019 comes out with many proposals relating to accreditation of colleges and universities, establishment of new colleges, creation of dedicated research and innovation funds and better regulation of institutions. Thus, the proposed NEP 2019 can prove to be a boon if its vision is implemented correctly.

In addition to the Draft NEP, 2019, government has taken other measures in the area of education. In Union Budget 2018-19, it proposed to take a holistic approach towards education rather than the earlier differentiated one from pre-nursery to Class 12 i.e. to integrate them under a new programme called “*Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan*” (SSA 2.0) (translated as ‘Holistic Education Campaign’). Further it also subsumed the three schemes of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), *Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan* (RMSA) and Teacher Education (TE) into this programme for better implementation. SSA 2.0 promises to bring out new legal provisions related to SDG Goal 4 at national and State level. The Government has also announced its plan to give a boost to higher education through heavy investment of ₹1,00,000 crore in next

four years under the ‘Revitalising Infrastructure and Systems in Education’ (RISE) plan and another ₹10,000 crore to 20 top varsities selected as “Institutions of Eminence.”

5. Conclusions

From the above analysis, it is evident that SDG Goal 4 poses a strong challenge for India and unless consistent measures are taken, it will not be possible to achieve them by 2030. There is a strong co-relation between spending on education and the benefits it brings in health sector, economy and improving the quality of life of people. In order to reap these benefits the government needs to urgently increase the financial resources for education schemes and programmes. Linking primary health care with elementary education has proved to improve education of students in Bangladesh and the same model can be studied in context of India. There are lot of disadvantaged people in India for whom daily survival is more important than education. For such people, schools can be used to compensate for the domestic disadvantages, particularly in case of girls. The Draft NEP, 2019 looks promising but it will not prove to be effective unless the co-ordinating agencies like Ministries, State, Departments and Boards are re-structured to talk to each other without the *red tapism* in bureaucracy. India already has the biggest individual identification mechanism in form of Aadhaar. Although it is being used in many places to tackle the problem of student drop-out and teacher absenteeism through biometric attendance, the same must be implemented in the entire country. Another significant set of stakeholders are the migrant workers in the informal economy who are not able to give education to their children due to migration. The government must introduce flexible migration cards and related support system for them so that accessible education is not a struggle for them. Finally, the government must use disaggregated data in place of national data for better analysis of problems at hand and performance of schemes and projects based on segmented categorization like disabled, women, minorities, migrants, etc.

Education is a complex and multi-layered issue and is linked to other subjects such as health, empowerment, financial status and societal biases. SDGs recognize this nuance and thus encourage governments to take a comprehensive approach towards problems. Performance of India is critical for the overall success of SDGs in creating a sustainable, equitable and inclusive world. Using the power of ICT, it can achieve wonders and prove to be a benchmark for the entire world.

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