



# Sustaining the Sustainable Development Goals





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# Facilitating India's Educational Reforms Through Climate Education

India is proudly presented as the land of ancient wisdom and knowledge. Indians developed scriptures and literature in times when most civilizations were beginning to find rules and orders in their societies. The *Gurukul* system (residential schools) dates back to 5000 BC. With Sanskrit as the medium of teaching, students learned subjects like religion, medicine, philosophy, warfare, astrology and holy scripture. Students were encouraged to follow human values of empathy, creativity, solidarity, develop strong character, and be righteous and virtuous. The emphasis was on an all-rounded development, to be mindful of one's inner self and perform duties as an ideal citizen. Education was the bedrock of an ever-evolving society, an instrument which would establish the intellectual supremacy of Indian polymaths worldwide.

The education system has seen many alterations and influences since then, depending upon who ruled the country. The current form of education is based on the ethos established during colonial times. The British introduced policies and commissions to shape the way in which they

perceived education in India could support their trade and extend their rule. Emphasis on the English language was laid, subjects like science and mathematics took center stage, and only upper class or middle class Indians could receive education so as to connect the government with the masses. It was only in 1854 that the Magna Carta of British Education in India, plainly known as the Wood's Dispatch<sup>1</sup> brought significant changes in this system. It called for the setting up of education departments in every province, schools in every district and universities for higher education. It promoted the teaching of vernacular languages and women's education. Wood's Dispatch and the subsequent commissions ensured that education reached the masses and followed a clear system (primary and secondary level). A well-rounded school education ensured quality of pupils at the university level.

India is a young country demographically, with more than 50 percent of its population below the age of 25 and more than 65 percent below the age of 35. This demographic dividend of India's young population can easily turn into a demographic

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<sup>1</sup> Wood, Charles (n.d.). "Woods Despatch of 1854." Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/mr3x6yed>.

burden if their strengths are not appropriately channeled; and education plays a crucial role in this regard. The literacy rate at the time of independence was 16 percent. The current estimated literacy rate stands at 77.7 percent, with female literacy rate at 70.3 percent and male literacy rate at 84.7 percent.<sup>2</sup> Though not a matter of pride (given societal norms, hierarchical and patriarchal constraints, as well as the slow path of development), this is significant progress.

Sustainable Development Goal 4 calls for ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education, and promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all. For India, this is an important goal, as it recognizes the need for quality education to sustain its growth. India currently ranks at 112 out of 166 countries in overall SDG ratings, with a score of 63.45 in 2023. An improvement in educational indicators can bring India closer to achieving the SDGs. India has set a goal to achieve 100 percent gross enrolment ratio in school education by 2030. As per the SDG ratings of 2023, there are challenges remaining in fulfilling these commitments.

Acknowledging the impediments and the fact that universal access to education is critical for human development, the Constitution of India has provisioned various Articles and Directive Principles. The primary objectives are to eliminate illiteracy, provide universal primary education and vocational training. A number of schemes fulfilling these objectives have been rolled out in the past.

Notable among them are the following: The National Adult Education Programme 1978, which later became the National Literacy Mission 1988, aimed at enhancing literacy amongst people aged between 15 to 35 years old. The Mid-Day Meal Scheme, launched in 1995, which provides free meals to students which in turn helps in improving enrolment, as well as attendance and retention in schools. This scheme applies to government schools only.

Some recent initiatives have also tried to align with SDG 4 and leveraged the inclusive and equitable framework provided in the SDGs. They include: *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA), launched in 2001 with the objective of providing universal access to elementary education; *Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan* (RMSA), launched in 2009 with the objective of providing universal access to secondary education; the National Scheme of Incentive to Girls for Secondary Education (NSIGSE), launched in 2009 to provide financial assistance to families of girl child from economically and socially underprivileged groups; *Beto Bachao Beti Padhao* (Save the Girl Child, Educate the Girl Child), launched in 2015 with the dual objective of improving child sex ratio and encouraging girl child education; and the New India Literacy Programme, launched in 2023, is aimed to provide literacy, life skills, vocational skills, basic education and continuing education to 50 million non-literates in the age group of 15 years old and above.

**“India currently ranks at 112 out of 166 countries in overall SDG ratings.**

Image: www.castrips.org



<sup>2</sup> Swargiary, Khritish and Kavita Roy (2022). “Literacy Rate in India in 2022.” *Academicia: An International Multidisciplinary Research Journal*. 12 (8); pp. 87-93.

Apart from these, two landmark reforms have been carried out to transform the education system. First is the Right to Education Act 2009 (RTE Act), which guarantees education as a fundamental right of every child. It mandates (a) free and compulsory primary education to children between the age of 6 to 14 years, (b) 25 percent seat reservation for children belonging to the poor section of society, even in private schools, and (c) improvement in learning outcomes by increasing enrolment and improving infrastructure, among other things. Since the implementation of the RTE Act, many states have seen increases in enrolment in upper primary levels. Overall, it has increased by 19.4 percent. There is much to be desired in the implementation of the Act. Primary challenges include integration between different socioeconomic classes of students, and the difficulty in navigating the administrative process.

The second reform is the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The policy envisions an inclusive education system offering equality of opportunity. The guiding principles include accessibility, equity, quality, affordability and accountability. It proposes the use of regional languages as medium of instruction, standardization of grading practices, and a skill-based system which promotes critical thinking and problem-solving approach. With the NEP, the government aims to bring back traditional Indian values into the modern education system, to rebrand India as a “global knowledge superpower”<sup>3</sup>.

In spite of these efforts, India's literacy rate is still below the world average of 86.3 percent. There are state-wise disparities as well, primarily due to limited state capacities. Kerala, a state with the highest literacy rate, is at 93.91 percent and then there is Bihar, a state with the lowest literacy rate at 63.82 percent. Gender parity in education still remains a major challenge, due to social and cultural norms. Girls' education is affected due to early marriages, restriction in mobility, care work at home, economic condition of the family, and preference for male children in the allocation of household income for education, amongst others.

A growing population, government's lack of foresight, and insufficiency in delivering quality education by public or government schools has paved a path for the privatization of this sector in a big way. As of 2021-22, 22.6 percent schools in India were privately managed.<sup>4</sup> This comes as no surprise since the quality of education in private



Image: medium.com

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schools far exceeds government schools, teacher-student ratio is better; performance indicators are compatible with higher education institution enrolment; and infrastructures are up-to-date. Hence, it becomes a natural choice, especially in urban areas. Moreover, education is now viewed as an economic input, and not a social good as in earlier times. This has encouraged private institutions to shape educational curriculum according to industry demands, sidelining the primary objective of self-growth.

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Education (2023). “National Education Policy 2020.” New Delhi. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/ywhnvvhe>.

<sup>4</sup> Education for All in India (n.d.). “Samagra Shiksha India Report Card 2021-2022.” Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/3thtf3j9>.



Image: blog.brac.net

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COVID-19 has also pushed back many efforts made in the sector and heightened existing inequalities. Millions of students were not able to reach schools or be in shared spaces to continue classes. Private schools, especially in urban areas, readily equipped themselves with digital learning resources to begin online teaching. However, in government schools, in rural areas more so, this transition didn't happen till almost at the end of the first wave.

The Economic Survey 2022-23 points to the fact that the total expenditure on education still remains at 2.9 percent of the country's GDP.<sup>5</sup> If India wishes to become a knowledge superpower, it needs to start spending more for the education sector, at least at par with some developed countries like the United States, where the expenditure on education is at least 6 percent of the GDP. Even with the current spending and efforts in elevating literacy rates, the state of education remains questionable. While gaining reading and writing skills are important, using the same to analyze and create meaningful knowledge, and shape actions for the betterment of society is another.

Presently, India's education system is designed to supply graduates who can land handsome jobs. In

such a system, qualification matters, merit on the basis of performance matters; but negligible focus is put on pruning soft skills or building character or responding to the challenges of society. Education is equivalent to power. Educated citizens can mold public opinion and build a stronger nation. This is unfortunately missing from the present system.

Take for example climate change, which is the biggest and the most urgent crisis being faced by humanity. Apart from a few mentions in science textbooks, not much focus is given to the crisis. SDG 13 on climate action calls for urgent action to combat climate change and its impact. As per the SDG ratings of 2023, India has achieved this goal. But there are other indicators on which India still needs to deliver, as part of the goals under the Paris Agreement.<sup>6</sup> There hasn't been a greater need for convergence of resources and synergistic actions which would help in addressing multiple goals at a time. If educational reforms could foresee the need for compulsory integration of climate education in the present curriculum, a multitude of challenges could be addressed simultaneously. Consequently, all this would contribute towards achieving sustainable development in India and the world.

<sup>5</sup> Sahay, Sandeepa (2023). “India's National Education Budget for 2023-24.” British Council. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/cctxud9n>.

<sup>6</sup> Government of India (2022). “India's Updated First Nationally Determined Contribution Under Paris Agreement (2021-2030).” New Delhi. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/yezbtntsp>.

“Climate Education can frame educational goals that they ultimately lead to inclusive education for a sustainable planet.

Image: sundayguardianlive.com



In real terms, Climate Education can exemplify a progressive narrative by framing educational goals in a way that they ultimately lead to inclusive education for a sustainable planet. Think of it in the framework of **CLIMA-ED**.

**Integrated CURRICULUM** – The NEP 2020 lays down the importance of environmental education, ecological responsibility and sustainability education. An integrated approach should ensure that these concepts don't just remain topics in textbooks but are embodied in the way education is imparted. For instance, learning in a natural environment should be encouraged, for students to start valuing nature before they are taught to “save” the same. School buildings and premises should demonstrate sustainability principles. They should be energy efficient, climate resilient and should double as emergency shelters during

disasters. This would fulfill the objectives under SDG 9 on building resilient infrastructure and SDG 12 on promoting sustainable consumption as well. For this purpose, disaster preparedness plan needs to be made part of the school charter. Damage caused to school buildings and associated infrastructure like power supply, water supply and sewage system due to disasters or climate related incidents disrupt learning cycles and cause psychological trauma to students.<sup>7</sup> It is crucial to address such human vulnerabilities, and educate students on the impact of climate change, in a scientific and sensitive manner.

**LEARNERS** for Life – The purpose of any education system should be to ignite curiosity and inquisitiveness amongst students, and not provide ready answers. When curricula are singularly aimed at training professionals for employment, they kill curiosity and the desire to know more. With the ever-changing landscape of politics, society and environment, newer challenges are thrown at us every day. No form of education should be definitive and conclusive. The goal of education should be to lead and leave open the scope for further exploration, to learn and unlearn continuously, irrespective of age or where they are placed professionally.

**INDIGENOUS** knowledge – Our history and traditions are goldmines of knowledge. Long before formal education came about, communities followed oral traditions and had ways to address issues related to health, agriculture, weather conditions, etc. The ethos of respecting, appreciating and worshiping nature was integral to living. Ideas like harmonious living, extracting resources only as per need, maintaining the balance between nature and human activity were central to human existence. Hence it is imperative that courses designed around climate change emphasize on the value of traditional and indigenous knowledge. Learning about different cultures, religions and languages should be encouraged to broaden knowledge horizons. This would integrate Goal 11 of the SDGs which talks about sustainable cities and communities.

**MAINSTREAM** – Schools that impart nature-based education, eco-schools, schools for disabled or differently abled, schools for girls – these are excellent examples of inclusive and sustainable education. Only that they are not. In a country as huge as India, having a few such schools is literally a drop in the ocean. They may be highly impactful in their learning outcomes, and coveted examples

<sup>7</sup> Pendharkar, Anand, Rahul Palekar and Amruta Padgaonkar (2021). *Climate Actioneers' Primer: A Beginners' Toolkit (First Edition)*. Mumbai and New Delhi: SPROUTS and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung India Office; p. 9.

in their field. However, they will remain just that unless they are scaled up and mainstreamed until they become the norm. For inclusive, equitable and sustainable education, we need integration of different methods of education, with diverse groups of students to be part of mainstream education. Ultimately, the aim of education is to transform students into empathetic, compassionate, respectful, and socially responsible humans. This can only be achieved when there are opportunities for seamless interaction between different groups, supervised and aided by trained teachers.

**AGILITY** – Any educational process should enable students to make sense of the information provided to them, and form their own understanding of the same. Critical/analytical/creative thinking and continuously upgrading skills to be more future ready should be encouraged through the process, while the mind needs to be agile and active to absorb a continuous stream of information. Similarly, the system needs to be agile too, to respond to the new requirements. This is critical in times of climate change as new information and challenges unfold every day.

Educate to **EMPOWER** – Young people around the world are increasingly becoming aware and fighting against climate change. The ways in which young people use technology for effective

messaging and mass outreach, is remarkable. Climate education could further empower students and young professionals to prepare evidence-based research that can form as bases for outreach activities, and effect policy changes. Campaigns and pressure groups led “by students for students” can give them the confidence to become active stakeholders in climate change discourse.

Duty of a **DEMOCRAT** – One of the strengths of progressive and social democrats is the ability to interact and empathize with different stakeholder groups. Be it natural allies or the status quo, democrats can pursue honest discussions and facilitate multi-stakeholder interactions. With regard to climate education and fulfillment of SDGs, democrats can provide avenues for collaborative action and partnerships, as is desired under Goal 17. Integrating ideas from feminist groups, environmentalists, climate change experts, PWD groups, youth, other marginalized sections of the society, industry, businesses etc., can truly enrich the process of educational reforms. Promoting partnerships between civil society, local communities and educational institutions can result in a holistic education system. And for this purpose, democrats should capitalize their discursive power, form alliances, and craft a progressive narrative for education in the country, which is inclusive, just AND sustainable. ■

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