

## UNIVERSALISATION OF SECONDARY EDUCATION IN ASSAM: PROBLEMS AND STRATEGIES FOR ACHIEVEMENT

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### Abstract

Secondary education acts as a mile stone in the socio-economic, scientific and technological development of a country. Secondary education is vital input for human resource development and is the root of progress and improvement of other stages of education like elementary and higher education. A sound system of quality secondary education is an edifice upon which success of whole educational system of a country depends a lot. In spite of having such importance secondary education has not been given due importance in the policy development of India as it deserves. But recently, with the successful implementation of Sarva Shikha Abhiyan (SSA), a large number of students are passing out from upper primary classes which create a huge demand for secondary education in the country. Therefore, a mission in the name of Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) has been introduced to make secondary education universal in India. But there are many challenges in the way of achieving universalisation of secondary education (USE). This article explores the status and problems of USE and tries to find out some effective strategies for proper implementation of the mission of USE.

*Key words- Secondary education, Universalisation, Status, Problems, Strategies.*

### Introduction

The progress of a country depends on its educational development. All levels of education have their own contribution in the national development of the country. But it is particularly secondary education which acts as a milestone in the socio-economic, scientific and technological development of the nation. Secondary education is a vital input for human resource development and essential for economic growth of a country. While primary education gives instruction in fundamental skills which are essentials for citizenship and everyday living, in secondary education the students explore various fields of knowledge, acquire further tools for solution of problems and prepares for advanced learning. "Much of the progress of a country depends on the expansion and improvement of secondary education and chiefly on the institutions that impart such instruction" (Das, 1990).

### Significance of Universalisation of Secondary Education

Universalisation of secondary education (USE) is a new concept in the field of Indian education system. Universalising secondary education means that (i) all children of age group 14-16 years are enrolled in secondary classes (Net Enrolment Ratio, 100%); (ii) they remain in the system (retention rate, 100%), and (iii) transit to the first grade of the next education cycle (Mehta, 2003). A study conducted by World Bank in India (2006) has stated that as fundamental level, secondary education has fulfilled two objectives of education and i.e., to offer all students the

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opportunity to obtain a basic level of skills and knowledge considered necessary for adult life, and to provide relevant education for all students, as they choose either to continue studying further on in academic line or a mere vocational route or to enter the world of work. Therefore the transition from primary to secondary education has become an important junction in young people's lives. It is in this context 'The Report of a Committee on Transition from Basic to Upper Secondary Education and Training' (2005) has stated that it must be seen as a larger transition phase in which young person gradually clarifies his/her performance and aims regarding further education and career. Success in this transition is of utmost importance to a student's further studies. Secondary education covers that time of people's life, when young people go through profound transition in their social, physical and intellectual development as they leave childhood, prepare for adult responsibilities. Strengthening the quality of education provided in lower secondary education in a country can contribute to overall attainment "As students' success in key subjects in lower secondary is a prerequisite to succeed in upper secondary and higher education or to enter into the world of work with adequate competencies" (OECD, 2011).

Since universalisation of elementary education (UEE) in India is a constitutional commitment, therefore all the efforts of Indian government have focused on spreading elementary education. As a result of these efforts India has remarkably progressed in the field of education. Realising the importance of secondary education in Individual's life and in national progress as a whole the National Policy of Education of 1986 and its modified version of 1992 specifically laid emphasis on increasing access to secondary education with particular focus on participation of girls, Schedule Casts (SCs) and Schedule Tribes (STs); increased autonomy of Boards of Secondary Education to enhance their ability to improve quality; introduction of ICT in school curriculum for coping with globalization; renewed emphasis on work ethos and values of a humane and composite culture in the curricula; and vocationalisation through specialized institutions or through the refashioning of secondary education to meet the manpower requirements of the growing Indian economy (Para 5.13 to 5.15). Thus, the critical role of secondary education in fostering social change and economic development was well recognized long ago by several committees and policy pronouncements in India but the Government of India mainly focused on universalisation of elementary education which has relegated secondary education to the margins of public policy.

Regarding the universalisation of secondary education, the report of 'National Conference: Focus Secondary Education' (2001) has stated that elementary education cannot be the natural target; it is only a means towards an end. The parental expectation for schooling of their children is not literacy but leading them to a qualifying level that opens the opportunities to the world of work and higher education. Thus, natural target of universal education is secondary education. It is well recognized that eight years of education are insufficient to equip a child for the world of work as also to be a competent adult citizen. "The pressure on secondary education is already being felt due to the success of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) which has been being implemented all over the country in collaboration with the State Governments. Mid-day meal scheme is a part of this programme. As a result of these steps the 'Out of School' children (6-14 years) has come down to less than 5% of the total population in the age group" (World Bank, 2009). Thus, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan to universalize elementary education for the age group of 6-14 has already set the stage for an exponential growth of demand for secondary education. A committee of Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE) was constituted in September 2004 with the following term of reference: "to prepare a blueprint for the universalisation of secondary education consequent upon the attainment of universalisation of elementary education." The guiding principles of universal secondary education according to this report of the committee (2004-05) should be 'Universal Access, Equality and Social Justice, Relevance and Development and Structural and Curricular Consideration'. Following the guidelines of CABE (2004-05) and along with the success of UEE the Government of India has launched another scheme for universalisation of education at secondary

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level in the year 2009 which is known as Rastriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) during eleventh five-year Plan (2007-2012) and now is going to be implemented in all the states of India. After the formulation of RMSA, the thirst for both quantitative and qualitative expansion of secondary education has become more and more strong.

Assam is the biggest and educationally advanced state in north-east India. The Government of Assam has tried to implement all the schemes/programmes and missions launched by Central Government for spreading education from primary to higher education in the state. At present like elementary education, secondary education also has been given due importance as it is considered as the last stage of formal education for a large majority of students in India. Therefore, "It is absolutely essential to strengthen this stage by providing greater access and also by providing quality in a significant way" (Goswami, 2013). As mentioned in the 'Working Group Report on Secondary and Vocational Education' of 12<sup>th</sup> five-year plan, "While provision of primary education for all as guaranteed by the Right to Education Act 2009 could ensure significant improvement in the overall status of human development, it is unlikely that the country will significantly succeed in reducing poverty and creating a more equitable society without adequately focussing on improving secondary education." Realising this importance of secondary education the State government of Assam has launched the scheme of RMSA 2009 following the guidelines provided by the 'Framework of RMSA -2009' prepared by Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) of India with a view to make good quality secondary education- available, accessible and affordable to all young persons in the age group of 14-18 years.

### **Existing Status of Universalization of Secondary Education in Assam in Relation to UEE**

In India, the foundation of modern education system was laid down by British rulers. In Assam also, western type of education began from pre-independence era. The first secondary school of the state established in Guwahati during British period and this school is now known as 'Cotton Collegiate School'. After independence, the government of Assam adopted different schemes in collaboration with Central Government for the quick promotion of secondary education in the state. The state government of Assam like other states of the country has initiated a number of programmes for development of education. The government has made various efforts to eradicate illiteracy through a number of programmes like National Literacy Mission (NLM), Total Literacy Mission (TLM) etc. Consequently, the literacy rate of Assam has also increased from 53.41% in 1991 to 73.18% in 2011. However, it is still below the national average of 74.04%. The Shakshar Bharat Mission is also in operation in the districts where literacy rate is below 50%. Still there is a gender gap in literacy rate, as the female literacy rate in Assam is only 67.5% as against male literacy rate of 78.81% with a gap of 11.5. Some specific programmes also for enhancement of women literacy rate have been launched but the gender gap in the state still exists.

Efforts have also been made for the universalisation of elementary education. Accordingly, in Assam, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) was started in 2002. And after launching the programme of SSA, there has been remarkable change in the field of elementary education scenario in Assam. At the time of launching of SSA in 2002-03, the enrolment in primary schools was 41, 54,077; it has been increased to 57, 04,044 in 2011-12 and 58,06, 184 in the year 2013-14 according to Elementary Education Management Information System (EMIS) of the state (DISE, 2013-14). Drop-out is one of the major problems in education sector. However it has been reduced from 20.38% at lower primary and 35.19% at upper primary stage to about 11.94 to 7.20 during 2013-14. The number of schools has increased from 61,110 in 2011-12 to 64,171 in the year 2013-14 and the number of teachers in Government schools has increased from 57, 04,044 in 2011-12 to 58,06,184 in 2013-14(DISE, 2013-14).

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In 1962, Board of Secondary Education in Assam (known as SEBA) was formulated and since then it has taken the charge of controlling and reorganising secondary education in Assam. After the formulation of National Policy of Education (NPE, 1986) and as per the recommendations of the policy in some districts of Assam, Navodaya Vidyalayas and Kendriya Vidyalayas have been established where efforts are taken to give quality secondary education to the students on the basis of merit. After launching the scheme of RMSA, Assam has made a remarkable progress in the field of secondary education. RMSA is in operation in all the districts for providing meaningful quality secondary education to the children in the age group of 14-18 years by 2017 and achieve universal retention by 2020. Its objective is to achieve Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of 75% for class IX to XII within five years. According to DISE (2010-11), the Government of India during the 11<sup>th</sup> five-year plan the Government of Assam has projected 15.82 lakh enrolment at the secondary level and 12.39 at higher secondary level till 2017. It means that a gap of 8.88 lakhs students at the secondary level and 10.14 lakh students at the higher secondary level will have to be filled up. As per the DISE report (2013-14) the total enrolment of students at secondary level is 8,64,717, out of which boys' enrolment is 4,13,177 (47.78%) and girls' enrolment is 4,51,540 (52.22) in Assam, while National level boys' enrolment is 52.89% and girls' enrolment is 47.11 out of total 3,46,40,103 enrolled students at secondary level. Similarly, at higher secondary level the percentage of girls' enrolment in Assam is 46.51% and the percentage of boys is 46.51% out of 1,99,23,782 total numbers of enrolled students in higher secondary schools. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of students in the state at lower secondary level is 61.86% and 23.86% at higher secondary level. Similarly, the Net Enrolment Ratio in the state at lower secondary level is 43.80% and 16.39% at higher secondary level. "It is needless to mention that without bringing all remaining boys and girls (including all categories) under the umbrella school education neither the goal of universal elementary education nor secondary education can be achieved. It is still possible that many children of age group 15+ to 16+ and 17+ to 18+ are still out of school or few of them are in elementary classes. It may also be observed that only elementary school graduates can be admitted in Grade IX, which is the first grade of the next higher level i.e. secondary level. This means enrolment of secondary level is not a function of corresponding age specific population i.e. 15+ to 16+ but is a function of elementary graduates" (Mehta, 2013).

Similarly DISE report (2012-13) has revealed that number of regular teachers at secondary level in Assam 56,935 and at higher secondary level is 12,961. The percentage of female teachers in secondary level is 29.53% and in higher secondary level is 32.33%. The qualification of teachers at secondary as well as at higher secondary level is improving in the state. The number of graduate teachers at secondary level is 81.14% and post graduate teachers is 11.9% and the number of below graduate teachers is 6.96% whereas the percentage of post graduate teachers is 81.4%, 16.99% graduate teachers and 1.62% below graduate teachers have been working at higher secondary level.

As per the DISE, (2012-13) the total numbers of secondary schools in Assam is 6,829 and the total number of schools at higher secondary level is 1,579. The percentage of schools located in rural areas of Assam is 85.08 as against the percentage of schools in rural areas in All India level which is 70.37. But the Government of Assam has targeted to increase the number of secondary schools up to 9,887 and to higher secondary schools up to 7,744 till 2017. It means that there is a gap of 3,308 secondary schools and 6,165 higher secondary schools which needs to be established within five years duration.

### **Problems of USE in Assam**

Provision of access is a precondition to educational progress at any level. A study conducted by World Bank on secondary education (2009) revealed four key constraints which control access to secondary education in India and i.e.:-

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- ❖ insufficient and uneven distribution of school infrastructure;
- ❖ lack of trained teachers and inefficient teacher deployment;
- ❖ sub-optimal use of the private sector to expand enrolment capacity and to achieve social objectives; and,
- ❖ insufficient open schooling opportunities for those who have left the formal system.

In Assam secondary education suffers from various problems like low access, low participation, low quality and the issue of equity. Along with these issues, the gender gap in secondary education is also significant. Some other research studies conducted on some issues of secondary education like access, demand, efficiency, curriculum, supervision, administration etc. in Assam have revealed that secondary education and secondary schools, both are suffering from lots of problems. These problems create major challenge or bottleneck in the progress of secondary education in the state which must be addressed first to achieve the goal of USE with quality improvement in true sense. Here, some major issues or challenges which should be effectively dealt for successful implementation of the scheme of USE are briefly discussed below:-

- ❖ **Infrastructure facilities related issues:** In Assam, secondary education/schools have suffered from the lack of basic infrastructural facilities like lack of class rooms, table, chair, supply of electricity, drinking water facility; toilets etc. which are to be present in every secondary school for creation of conducive learning environment. Most of the secondary schools in the state are being run without minimum facilities i.e. inadequate facilities of building, laboratory, library, playground, inadequate lavatory system, separate toilet for girls, hostel facility for students, lack of pure drinking water facility, and lack of running water all the time in school and other equipments necessary for a good secondary school. Most of the secondary schools do not have separate computer room, separate staff room, principal's room, common room for students, auditorium or conference hall. There are not adequate numbers of instructional materials in the classroom, no proper seating arrangements for students with disabilities in most of the government secondary schools.
- ❖ **Curriculum related issues:** Curricular structure and course offerings are the necessary condition for quality secondary education. Contemporary instructional processes and practices in secondary schools are characterized largely by lectures where students are passive listeners. Most importantly, they miss out on 'learning to know' or learning to learn through the present instructional process of the school. The curriculum is theory dominated. According to the academic specialists and experts in educational field, curriculum at secondary level should be diversified, useful and productive to students. Equal weightage should be given to theory and practice, but the existing pattern of curriculum is not relevant to suit the diverse needs, demands and talents of secondary students and thus fails to enable our students to face the challenges of life in modern society.
- ❖ **Teacher related issues:** Teachers are integral part of the education system and it is on them that the responsibility of quality of education mainly rests. At present, the prescribed norm for teachers in secondary schools in Assam is Bachelor's degree along with training which is also known as Bachelor of Education that imparts necessary pedagogical skills to impart education. Data on teachers' qualification revealed that among the states of India, Assam had a very low percentage of teachers (8%) with Bachelor's degree and Uttar Pradesh had a high i.e. 68% teachers at secondary level with Bachelor's degree among the states of India (NUEPA, 2006). Now, this condition in Assam is quite improving and most of the teachers appointed at secondary schools are graduate and more than that. But still secondary education in Assam is characterized by lack of subject teachers, lack of female teachers, overworked teachers and untrained teachers and non-availability of specially trained teachers for teaching special subjects.

- ❖ **Teaching-learning process related issues:** In most of the secondary schools of the state, teaching-learning process in the classroom is mainly dominated by lecture and traditional methods. There is a lack of interactive and participative learning methods at secondary level which makes the students passive learner. In most of the schools there is no provision of remedial teaching for slow learner and also no provision of enrichment materials activities for fast learner.
  - ❖ **Teaching-aids related issues:** Teaching-aids like blackboard, chalk, duster etc. are available in most of the secondary schools but there is a lack of modern devices such as projector, computer etc. and thus modern classroom communication devices are negligible in secondary schools. Teachers of the schools also do not show interest in using teaching aids properly in their teaching and there is a lack of interest and efficiency in the teachers to prepare teaching aids according to the need of the classroom presentation.
  - ❖ **Library related issues:** In Assam, most of the secondary schools lack provision of good library building, lack of qualified librarian and lack of sufficient number of books. In some schools, a separate room is used as a library, but there is no adequate number of furniture, bookshelf, almirah etc. for keeping books systematically. Even students of secondary education are not encouraged to use library regularly and effectively for their academic benefit in the schools.
  - ❖ **Evaluation/examination related issues:** The process of evaluating the students' knowledge and performance is largely dominated by written examination and emphasis is given on development of rote-learning which is not supported by psychological principles of learning. Besides, there is no provision of self- evaluation of the students in the teaching-learning process in the schools. Regarding monitoring and school based supervision process at secondary schools, it can be said that there is no regular supervision of teacher's diary and inspection of class work, achievements, integrity and honesty in doing their duties.
  - ❖ **Time-table related issues:** In preparing time-table of the schools, maximum time is kept for conducting the classes of core-subjects. In most of the secondary schools of Assam adequate time is not fixed in the school routine or time table for conducting co-curricular activities, for using library by students and teachers, project work and community work for students which are essential part of the educational programme of school education.
  - ❖ **School management related issues:** In most of the government schools heads/principals are less effective in using their leadership skills for motivating teaching and non-teaching staff to do their duties with competency and in maintaining discipline in school environment. In secondary schools principal/head is to play the role of manager, guide and supervisor but due to the skills and interest most of the heads of the schools become failure to get proper support, co-operation and suggestions from teachers, members of school managing committee, parents and community members regarding the problems and developmental issues of the schools.
  - ❖ **School guidance related issues:** There is no provision of educational and vocational guidance for secondary school students. Even teachers of the schools lack adequate knowledge in this regard to provide necessary academic and vocational guidance to students and therefore unable to deal effectively the secondary students' academic, emotional and personal problems. Academic and vocational guidance and counselling is very important for secondary students but in the state of Assam, there is no Government and action programme for implementation of school guidance service in the schools.
  - ❖ **Health care related issues:** In Assam, the provision of health care facility is not satisfactory in schools at both primary and secondary level. In most of the schools, there is no provision of regular health check-up of students, shortage of ambulance, no provision of physical education, no hygienic practices in school premises make the schools incapable for all round development of students.
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- ❖ **Community participation and support related issues:** Community participation and support in secondary school activities is essential as it helps to generate resources as well as good reputation of the school. But in most of the secondary schools there is no provision of regular interaction with parents of the students, no local NGOs, social workers, experienced and skilled persons are invited to discuss the issues related to school's progress and development in respect of society's expectations.
- ❖ **Transport and communication related issue:** Most of the secondary schools located in remote and hilly areas are suffered from the problem of transport and communication related facility. There is no provision of providing school bus or other vehicle for carrying students who are coming from distant places. Many places of Assam are flood affected and especially in rainy season students have to face the problem in continuing their schools for lack of good transport and communication facility.

### **Strategies for Achievement of USE in Assam**

Now like elementary education, secondary education is also going to be universalized. This transformation creates several challenges. On the one hand, access to and intake capacity of secondary education may have to be increased with a focus on un-served and other difficult areas and the barriers to transition and completion of secondary education by various sections of people need to be addressed and on the other hand, the quality and relevance of secondary education curriculum has to address the needs of both those who choose to go for higher education and those who enter the labour market. The curriculum is expected to equip the students with adequate cognitive skills to deal with complex situations in daily life and also in the world of work (Panda and Reddy, 2008). In order to deal with these issues, the government of India has launched a scheme for universal access and improvement of quality education at secondary stage (SUCCESS, covering the classes IX-X) during 11<sup>th</sup> five-year plan. The aim of this scheme is to achieve 100 percent enrolment and retention at high school and higher secondary level that includes vocational stream by 2020. The scheme is being initiated with a view to universalise access, reduce social, regional and gender disparities in enrolment, drop-out and retention and improve the quality with a focus on Science and Mathematics. Some important strategies on the basis of guidelines given by SUCCESS can be adopted for achieving the of 'Universalisation of Secondary Education' in Assam which include the followings: -

- ❖ Providing access to high school and higher secondary school within a distance of 5 and 8 km. respectively from each habitation. The habitations predominated by vulnerable groups like Schedule Caste and Schedule Tribes should be given priority.
- ❖ The opening of new secondary schools and strengthening the existing secondary schools in Assam. Establishment of model schools. The government of Assam has already sanctioned an amount of Rs. 102.54 crore during 2010-to 12 for opening model schools in Educationally Backward Blocks (EBBs). In Assam the number of EBBs is 81.
- ❖ Special provisions should be given for the education of girls and other marginal groups (Sc, St, minorities and students with disability etc.) by providing facilities like hostels, residential schools for girls, supply of uniforms, text-book and bicycle, scholarships, remedial coaching etc.
- ❖ Creation of ICT infrastructure in all secondary and higher secondary schools should be in priority list.
- ❖ In order to plan the location of schools in expanding the access and to meet the data requirements of planning of universal secondary education and monitoring of progress of various interventions, the National University of Educational Planning and Administration (NUEPA) had already initiated Secondary Education Management and Information System (SEMIS). The state government of Assam also has created SEMIS for elementary education

and SEMIS for secondary level for keeping and monitoring the record and progress of education at both the level respectively.

Only expansion of schools and enrolment of students do not help to achieve the goals of universal secondary education. For that quality of education must be improved. In order to remove the problems in providing accessible, affordable and quality secondary education to all, the following strategies can be adopted by the government, school authority, stakeholders of education to achieve the goals of USE in Assam in particular and in India in general and these are :-

- ❖ Providing reasonably good school building and equipment to all secondary schools.
- ❖ Appointment of trained and committed teachers in each secondary school.
- ❖ Appointment of teachers with regular pay scale and other benefits.
- ❖ Decreasing pupil-teacher ratio i.e. 30:1. Improving the quality of existing pre-service teacher education programme. Organising quality in service teacher education to all teachers on a periodical basis and with a follow up mechanism.
- ❖ Creating and sustaining teacher motivation.
- ❖ Improving the both physical and social environment of the school.
- ❖ Revitalising supervision system for secondary schools.
- ❖ Reorganisation of curriculum to imbibe local needs and incorporating the concerns of the National Curriculum Framework-2005.
- ❖ Improving teaching-learning processes to make them child centred, activity based and masterly learning oriented.
- ❖ Providing for remedial teaching and enrichment programmes at due occasions in classrooms.
- ❖ Introduction of formative evaluation and grading system to make it stress free for students.
- ❖ Introducing participatory management of secondary education with community support.

### **Conclusion**

Since the mid-1990s the Millennium Development Goals (MDS) and the Education for All (EFA) initiative have driven an education reform agenda predominantly focused on improving access to primary education in developing countries. In more recent years, proponents of post basic education have gained a voice and wider access to good secondary education is being increasingly recognised as a critical element in achieving the goals of human development, political stability and economic competitiveness (Acedo, 2002; Alvarez, Gillies and Bradsher, 2003; Holsinger and Cowell; 2000; King McGrath, Rose, 2007; UNESCO, 2007). As a result of Education for All movement in international level, a lot of changes have been taking place in India also and various policies and programmes to improve the access, participation and quality of elementary level have been introduced and implemented. The demand for universal secondary education in the country is coming largely due to enhanced literacy among parents, greater success of universal primary and upper primary education and growing awareness about value of education among people. Now in Assam like other states of India with the success in elementary education due to Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, a large number of students have knocked the doors of secondary education. Therefore, universalisation of secondary education with quality in our state is the need of the hour and the cost of ignoring this issue of secondary education will be much heavier for the state than responding to the needs. Without the expansion and development of secondary education and its quality, overall development of the education system of a state/country is not possible. Thus recognising the role and importance of secondary education for all, it has been rightly said that twentieth century was the century of developing primary education whereas the twenty-first century is going to be the century of developing secondary education for all.

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