



Role of Secondary Education in National Development: A Conceptual and Empirical Review

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ABSTRACT

Secondary education is really important for a country's growth. It helps people learn more than reading and writing skills. People get to learn skills that are needed in the world today. Secondary education is key to helping people improve their status, increase their skills and make the economy grow faster.

This study looks at how India's secondary education policies have changed over time. It starts from after India became independent and goes up to the new National Education Policy 2020. The study looks at these changes in the context of India's development. The research uses data from UDISE+ 2024-25 to check the state of education in India. It finds that there are differences in how people can access education, the condition of schools and how resources are distributed.

The results show that secondary education still has problems. It is hard to access schools especially in rural areas and for disadvantaged groups. This makes it hard for everyone to have chances in secondary education. The study also looks at how local governance systems, like Panchayati Raj Institutions' working. It checks the impact of partnerships between the government and private companies. It also looks at actions taken by the government to address these issues with education.

Finally, it checks if these strategies are really helping to achieve growth in education. It also checks if they match the long-term goals set out in the "Viksit Bharat 2047" vision, for India's education and overall development. The study wants to see if secondary education is getting better and if it is helping India to grow and develop.

Keywords: Secondary Education, National Education Policy 2020, UDISE+, Educational Inequality, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Public-Private Partnerships, Viksit Bharat 2047



Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations of Education.

In order to get the picture of secondary education in national development, we consider it important to take a look at the theoretical frameworks that underline the reason why the government and individuals invest in this industry. Education, in its most basic form, is the process of physical, intellectual and social growth. The etymology of the word has two origins: educare (to bring up) and educere (to lead out): in Latin, which implies both the transference of the societal values and the release of the natural potential of the individual (Al-Shuaibi et al., 2014). Within the nation-state, this is the key to developing a productive, politically involved citizenry.

The developmental importance of secondary education can be considered in three main theoretical perspectives. To begin with, Human Capital Theory argues that education is a strategic investment to the quality of the labor force (Patel et al., 2026). The education system boosts the marginal productivity of individuals through improvement of skills and knowledge which in turn boosts the economic growth of a country. Within this framework, the secondary stage is crucial because it brings in the specialized technical and cognitive abilities that make the difference between a modern workforce and a totally agrarian or unskilled one (Patel et al., 2026).

Second, the Capability Approach, as advocated by Amartya Sen, moves the emphasis not on solely economic indicators but on the growth of human freedom. According to this school of thought, the real yardstick of development is the degree to which people are free to be able to live the lives they cherish. Education equips the so-called capabilities-health awareness, political agency and critical reasoning-that enable the individuals to exercise their rights and be involved meaningfully in society (Sen et al., 1999). Lastly, the Social Mobility Perspective considers education as an essential tool to defeat the traditional status, caste, and class barriers (Afolabi et al., 2012). The secondary school in a stratified society may serve as a possible equalizer, providing students with disadvantaged backgrounds an opportunity for professionalism and social assimilation.

History of the Educational Commissions after Independence.

The Indian secondary education system has had its way through a number of high-level commissions which have identified systemic failures and recommended structural reforms to bring schooling into national focus.

University Education Commission (1948-49)

Soon after the independence, the University Education Commission was appointed by the Government of India, and its chairperson was the great philosopher-statesman, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan (Radhakrishnan et al., 1949). The commission was mainly concerned with higher education but realized that the quality of university education was closely connected with the quality of the secondary system (Radhakrishnan et al., 1949). The Radhakrishnan Commission found Indian universities were being over-filled with students who were not academically prepared, in large part due to the fact that secondary schools were being used as preparatory



schools to college admission instead of being considered themselves as full-fledged educational stages.

In a bid to correct this, the commission suggested a standard twelve year pre-university school cycle (Radhakrishnan et al., 1949). This plan was meant to make sure that the students had attained some degree of intellectual and emotional maturity before taking up specialized degrees. Moreover, the commission supported a well-rounded curriculum that combined academic, vocational, and technical courses (Radhakrishnan et al., 1949). The commission attempted to offer various avenues to give students skills that could be employed in the labour market, thus minimizing the burden on university enrolments and creating a more equal workforce.

The Secondary Education Commission (1952-53)

Based on the Radhakrishnan report, the government set up the Secondary Education Commission in 1952 under the chairmanship of the doctor A. Lakshmanaswami Mudaliar (Mudaliar et al., 1953). The Mudaliar Commission was the first to do a thorough review of the secondary stage and found a lot wanting including an impractical, bookish curriculum and a high dependence on rigid, high-stakes exams (Mudaliar et al., 1953). The commission stressed that the role of secondary education in a newly independent democracy should be the building of democratic citizenship and enhancement of vocational efficiency (Mudaliar et al., 1953).

The most important suggestion of the Mudaliar Commission was the creation of multipurpose schools (Mudaliar et al., 1953). These schools were meant to provide a diversity of streams, such as humanities, sciences, agriculture, fine arts and home science, and students to specialize based on their talents. The restructuring of the commission-proposed system, a three-year Junior Secondary stage and four-year Higher Secondary stage, was meant to develop a more democratic and accommodative system that would meet the needs of a developing nation (Mudaliar et al., 1953).

Commission/Policy	Chairman/Leader	Key Structural Recommendation	Primary Developmental Goal
University Education Commission (1948-49)	Dr. S. Radhakrishnan	12-year schooling cycle	Preparation for leadership and research (Radhakrishnan et al., 1949).
Secondary Education Commission (1952-53)	Dr. A.L. Mudaliar	Multipurpose schools	Democratic citizenship and vocational efficiency (Mudaliar et al., 1953).
Education Commission (1964-66)	Dr. D.S. Kothari	10+2+3 pattern	Science-based productivity and national integration (Kothari et al., 1966).
National Education Policy (2020)	Dr. K. Kasturirangan	5+3+3+4 pattern	Holistic development and 21st-century skills.



The Kothari Commission (1964–66)

The Kothari Commission was a landmark in the history of Indian education because it was originally the first to consider the educational system as a national tool of social and economic development (Kothari et al., 1966).

Framing the classroom as the chief driver of nation-building, the commission presented the 10+2 structural pattern, standardizing education across states and providing a decade of homogenized general education, followed by a special higher secondary level (Kothari et al., 1966). One of the key pillars of the Kothari reforms was the vocationalization of the higher secondary stage which was to be aggressively pursued so that 50 percent of the students are to be enrolled into the vocational streams (Kothari et al., 1966). The commission also suggested the Common School System; which was an egalitarian model that aimed at integrating children of all social-economic groups in the same local schools so as to promote national integration (Kothari et al., 1966). The commission struck a balance between modern science and other priorities (cultural identity and linguistic diversity) by requiring the study of science and mathematics in the first decade and codifying the Three-Language Formula (Kothari et al., 1966).

National Policies on Education (1968-1992): Evolution.

The suggestions of the different commissions were codified into a series of National Policies on Education (NPE) that transformed academic recommendations into legislation and administrative directives.

National Policy on Education (1968)

The 10+2+3 structure of the Kothari Commission was codified in the 1968 policy, which in effect transformed a fragmented school system into a unified national system. The policy created a critical junction point between general education and specialization in the university by enhancing the level of higher secondary education through an addition of the +2 level. The introduction of the formula of trilingualism stimulated the mastering of the native language, Hindi, and English and the formation of a multicultural but unitary national identity.

National Policy on Education (1986) and Programme of Action (1992)

The NPE 1986 brought in a new emphasis on equity and modernization. It was aware of the fact that the country was not developing due to the continued existence of regional, gender, and socioeconomic inequalities. In response to them, the policy created Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas (JNVs), residential schools of the rural talented students, so that financial deprivation could not stifle the talent. The use of educational technology (like computers and videos) to equip students to meet the information age was also a priority in the policy.

These goals were further elaborated in the 1992 Programme of Action (POA) which made the +2 stage a part of the school system and the National Open School (since renamed as NIOS) stronger to offer flexible learning opportunities to dropouts and working students. Combined, these policies stressed the themes of national integration, scientific temper, and reduction of regional disparities as the major goals of secondary schooling.



Recent Pedagogical Changing: NCF 2005 and the Legislative Milestones.

The reform of secondary education in the twenty-first century has changed the emphasis placed on physical infrastructure and structural standardization to the quality of the learning experience and legal rights of the student.

National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005.

The NCF 2005, developed by the National Council of Educational Research and Training, was a radical change in pedagogy, where behaviorist gave way to constructivist (NCERT et al., 2005). Constructivism assumes that students are not passive consumers of the information, but active makers of the knowledge who learn on the basis of their own experience (NCERT et al., 2005). To back this, the framework proposed a system known as Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE), a system that would substitute high stakes terminal exams with frequent, integrated evaluations of cognitive, social and physical development in a student (Yash Pal et al., 2005).

The Right to Education (RTE) Act 2009.

Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009) was a legislative pillar as it operationalized Article 21A of the Constitution. The Act made elementary education massified by ensuring children between the ages of 6 and 14 were provided with free schooling. Nevertheless, this victory resulted in a major bottleneck at the lower tier. Due to the legal requirement, which ceases at 14, there is a steep rise in the rates of dropout when students leave Class 8, with the cost of secondary education being a deterrent to further education among the economically disadvantaged students.

Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) and Samagra Shiksha

RMSA was introduced in 2009 and it included the expansion of secondary education by targeting a school in a five-kilometer radius of each community (Government of India et al., 2009). The program paid the expenses of science laboratories, libraries and toilets to the girls which greatly enhanced the institutional capacity of the government system. In 2018, the government combined RMSA, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and teacher education into "Samagra Shiksha," a comprehensive program that regards school education as a continuous system, starting with pre-primary education and continuing into Class 12. This merger enabled a more integrated approach to development, as learning outcomes were emphasized, rather than just the enrollment figures.

National Education Policy (NEP) 2020: Reimagining Secondary.

NEP 2020 is the first major revision of the Indian education system in more than 30 years, which radically re-thoughts the last mile of schooling. The policy integrates the ages of 3 to 18, by making the 10+2 system into a 5+3+3+4 developmental journey. The new Secondary (Classes 9-12) is intended as a four-year multidisciplinary block that puts a strong emphasis on critical thinking, depth of study and student agency in the choice of subjects.

Among the most radical changes in NEP 2020, the elimination of the hermetic academic silos can be identified. There are now openings to allow mixing of subjects across the traditional streams



of Science, Commerce, and Arts. Moreover, the policy entails the incorporation of vocational education in the secondary curriculum such that the students are job ready by the time they leave school. Evaluation is also undergoing revolution with the PARAKH center which puts emphasis on competency-driven testing, rather than rote tests, thus eliminating the psychological burden of board exams.

Current Scenario and Empirical Analysis (2024–25)

The recent condition of the Indian secondary education system has been described as a mass and continuous infrastructural modernization in forms of reports by the government and other citizen groups.

Enrollment Trends and Demographic Shifts.

The latest statistics of the UDISE+ 202425 show that the Indian school system presently accommodates more than 24.69 crore students (Ministry of Education et al., 2025). Although enrollment in the middle and secondary levels have experienced slight growth (6 lakh and 8 lakh respectively), the number of students at the foundational level (Classes 15) has dropped drastically by almost 25 lakh (Ministry of Education et al., 2025). This decrease has been mainly due to demographic changes, namely the decreasing Total Fertility Rate (TFR), which was 1.91 in 2021, lower than the replacement rate of 2.1.

Level of Education	Enrollment Change (2023-24 to 2024-25)	Total Enrollment (2024-25)
Foundational (Pre-primary to Class 5)	-25 Lakh (Ministry of Education et al., 2025)	11.84 Crore
Middle (Classes 6-8)	+6 Lakh	Part of overall 24.69 Cr (Ministry of Education et al., 2025)
Secondary/Sr. Secondary (Classes 9-12)	+8 Lakh	Part of overall 24.69 Cr
National Total (All Levels)	-11 Lakh	24.69 Crore

The "COVID Effect" and Public Sector Resurgence

One of the main tendencies found in the ASER 2021 report is the mass movement of students out of private schools to government schools (Pratham et al., 2021). As a result of the economic difficulties brought by the pandemic, many families transferred their kids to the public system, with the enrollment rates increasing by 65.8% in 2020 and 70.3% in 2021 (Pratham et al., 2021). Interestingly, it was the older children (1516 years) who had the highest enrollment into the government schools, with their enrollment rates rising to 67.4% in 2021 as compared to 57.4% in 2018 (Pratham et al., 2021). The change highlights the importance of government schools in the form of a safety net in times of national crisis.

Infrastructure and Digital Divide.



UDISE+ 2024-25 infrastructure metrics show a pressured, but modernising system. In Delhi, 5,556 schools are providing education to 44.9 lakh students with an average enrolment of 808 students in each school (Ministry of Education et al., 2025). 10 Simple amenities such as functional toilets of both genders are commonly found in most of the schools, but digital amenities such as solar panels and digital libraries are found in less than 10 percent and 35 percent schools respectively (Ministry of Education et al., 2025). 10 Pupil-teacher ratio (PTR) has been increasing since 2014, with the secondary level PTR currently being about 19:1 in the cities such as Delhi, although there are still single-teacher schools in certain areas (Ministry of Education et al., 2025).

Metric	Delhi Specifics (2024-25)	National Trends (2024-25)
Pupil-Teacher Ratio (Secondary)	19:1 (Ministry of Education et al., 2025)	Improved across all levels
Functional Washrooms (Girls')	4,720 / 5,556 schools	High priority in Samagra Shiksha
Digital Libraries	430 / 5,556 schools (Ministry of Education et al., 2025)	Emerging priority area
Total Enrollment	44.9 Lakh	24.69 Crore (Ministry of Education et al., 2025)

Complex barriers to Quality and Equity.

Although there has been quantifiable improvement, the secondary education system still experiences entrenched financial, structural and pedagogical challenges which constrain the role of the system in national development.

Economic and Financial Limits.

The chronic underinvestment in education is a still-significant obstacle. Although the Kothari Commission already suggested 6% GDP allocation in 1966, the contemporary public expenditures are at around 4% (Patel et al., 2026). This financial deficit is expressed through poor infrastructure, poor teacher recruitment and high opportunity cost of schooling among adolescents. According to ASER 2021 data, 27.4% of children in the school-going age group drop out of the system because of financial hardship, and many school-age children are forced into informal work to feed their families (Pratham et al., 2021).

Structural Barriers and Distance Factor.

Even though the primary schools have become common, access to secondary education is not even. The number of secondary schools within five kilometers of habitations is only 93 percent. This is one of the distance factors that mostly cause dropout among girls because in most cases their mobility is limited due to the safety or the culture (Afolabi et al., 2012). These disparities are further enhanced by the urban-rural divide where the rural schools tend to have no labs and ICT facilities as their urban counterparts.

The Crisis of Quality and Shadow Education.

The accrual of the learning deficits in the previous grades becomes a major pedagogical challenge. The no-detention policy, though aimed at alleviating stress, has in many cases, created loopholes



in primary literacy and numeracy. As a result, a lot of students join Class 9 unprepared to the cognitive requirements of the secondary curriculum. This has led to an enormous increase in private tuitions; ASER 2021 discovered that almost 40% of children are currently enrolled in so-called shadow education, which puts another strain on poor families (Pratham et al., 2021).

Social Mobility and Interventions Focused on Equity.

To address these issues, the Indian government and civil society have introduced specific interventions aimed at benefiting historically disadvantaged groups.

Residential Schooling and Scholarships.

Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) scheme offers residential education to girls of the SC, ST, and minority groups. The government has ensured that thousands of girls are given a safe environment to stay in their education through the extension of KGBVs to Class 12. Financial aid programs such as the National Means-cum-Merit Scholarship (NMMSS) and PM-YASASVI also provide meritorious students in economically disadvantaged groups with up to ₹20,000 in yearly stipend to reduce the opportunity costs and direct costs of secondary schooling.

The NGOs and Public-Private Partnerships.

Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have emerged to be essential partners in the enhancement of the quality of education. One of the digital education programs, the Vidya Sahyog program by the Lotus Petal Foundation, offers virtual introductory classes to students in underserved regions, filling the knowledge gap that has been caused by the absence of local teachers (Afnan et al., 2024). Likewise, the case of the Satya Bharti Adarsh Schools, funded by the Bharti Airtel Foundation, shows how corporate social responsibility can be used to deliver high-quality secondary education in rural Punjab.

Governance and decentralization within an institution.

There has been a change towards decentralization in the governance of secondary education, as a result of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992, enabling Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) (Nagendrappa et al., 2025).

The Potential of Local Governance

PRIs have been instrumental in the management of schools in states such as Kerala and Jharkhand. School attendance has been reported to rise to over 90% in Jharkhand through Bal Sabhas (school meetings) and Bal Sansads (children parliaments) involving students and society in making decisions about the school (Nagendrappa et al., 2025). These models imply that accountability and maintenance of infrastructure are much better when local stakeholders possess a voice (Tyagi et al., 2012).

Three Fs of Administrative Failure.

Nevertheless, decentralization cannot function well in most parts of India due to the so-called Three Fs: Functions, Funds, and Functionaries (Nagendrappa et al., 2025). The 11 PRIs frequently do not have the administrative means to employ or punish teachers, the money to repair school facilities (producing less than 1 per cent of their own revenues), or the trained kind



of functionaries to implement intricate educational strategies. NEP 2020 needs to be implemented effectively at the grassroots level by addressing these governance bottlenecks.

Fiscal Trends and Viksit Bharat 2047 Roadmap.

The future success of secondary education reform cannot be divorced from the commitment to the financial resources of the country and its vision to the centenary of its independence.

Budgetary Trends (2020–2026)

A comparison of 2020-2026 Union Budgets shows that the overall funding of education steadily grows, indicating a new government focus on human capital (Patel et al., 2026). Although there is a slight decline in the 2021-22 pandemic year, the allocations have been on an upward trend, exceeding 28 trillion in the 2025-26 cycle (Patel et al., 2026). This investment is being channeled more towards online education, skill building and post-pandemic recovery.

Fiscal Year	Total Education Allocation (₹ Crore)	National Context/Policy Focus
2020–21	99,312 (Patel et al., 2026)	Pre-pandemic baseline
2021–22	93,224 (Patel et al., 2026)	Pandemic-related fiscal strain
2022–23	1,04,278 (Patel et al., 2026)	Renewed commitment post-COVID
2023–24	1,12,899 (Patel et al., 2026)	Digital infrastructure and vocationalization
2024–25	120,627 (Patel et al., 2026)	Interim budget for NEP rollout
2025–26	128,650 (Patel et al., 2026)	Highest level of human capital investment

The vision 2047 of Viksit Bharat.

The Viksit Bharat @ 2047 program of the government is an idea that looks at India becoming a developed country by its centennial year of independence. The aim of this vision is a 30 trillion economy and a labor force that is completely skilled and active in the international market. To do this, the secondary education system has to transform into a technology-driven and flexible center that emphasizes problem-solving and creativity. Programs such as Mera Yuva Bharat (MY Bharat) aim to include the youth leadership in the national decision-making process such that the following generation is not only literate, but they can also help steer the nation to its centenary targets.

Strategic Conclusions and Recommendations.

The demographic dividend of India will hinge on secondary education that will either transform to productive workforce or social liability. Some strategic changes are needed to make this phase of schooling play its part in the national development.

To start with, fiscal empowerment of local governance should be the top priority. The panchayats should be given the financial freedom to address the local school issues and the administrative freedom to oversee the school officials (Nagendrappa et al., 2025). Second, the bottleneck at 14



needs to be removed by extending the legal right to free and compulsory education to Class 12, and this will remove the steep spike in dropout after Class 8.

Third, the curriculum needs to keep moving to 21st-century skills, i.e., digital literacy, entrepreneurship, and multidisciplinary thinking, as provided under NEP 2020. Lastly, making the public system cost-effective in modernisation, through scaling of public-private partnerships and NGOs collaborations, including those proposed by Vidya Sahyog and Satya Bharti models, can approach the innovation and infusion of resources required (Afnan et al., 2024). With better governance, equity, and development of real life skills, India has the opportunity to create a secondary education system as the foundation of a thriving, developed country by 2047.

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