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SECONDARY EDUCATION IN INDIA: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF CHALLENGES AND SYSTEMIC GAPS

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ABSTRACT

Secondary education serves as a critical bridge between foundational learning and higher education. However, in India, this sector faces numerous challenges that limit its effectiveness. This study presents an analytical overview of the key problems in secondary education across various regions. The issues are categorized into three major areas: systemic flaws in the educational framework, concerns related to students and teachers, and deficiencies in infrastructure and facilities. The analysis provides a foundation for policy reflection and calls for strategic reforms to enhance access, quality, and inclusiveness in India's secondary education system.

KEYWORDS: *Secondary Education, Educational Challenges, India, Teacher Issues, Infrastructure Gaps, Student Learning, Education System, Policy Implementation, Quality Education.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Since gaining independence, India has made concerted efforts to reform and reshape its secondary education policies and programs. As the crucial link between elementary education and higher or vocational studies, secondary education holds a strategic position within the broader educational framework. Recognizing this, national committees and commissions have repeatedly stressed the importance of strengthening this stage. Yet, the concern raised decades ago by the University Education Commission (1948–49)—that "our secondary education remains the weakest link in our educational machinery and needs urgent change" still holds true today (Dey, n.d., p. 92).

Over the decades, policymakers, researchers, and educators have drawn attention to systemic inefficiencies that hinder the effectiveness of secondary schooling. These issues are particularly visible in the form of outdated curricula, examination-oriented learning, uneven access across regions, teacher shortages, low student engagement, and poor infrastructural support. While numerous initiatives such as Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 have aimed to reform the sector, implementation gaps continue to undermine progress.

This article offers a critical review of the enduring challenges faced by secondary education in India, drawing from a broad body of national research. The paper offers an overview of the main systemic gaps that still exist in various regions. It looks at these challenges through three main areas: structural and policy issues, concerns of teachers and students, and problems with infrastructure. This approach helps deepen our understanding of the ongoing obstacles that hinder the growth and effectiveness of secondary education in India.

II. RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Secondary Education forms an indispensable connecting link among primary schooling and higher/professional studies and occupies a central slot, both in the individual development of learners and the general health of the system of education. Its role reaches not only to facilitating successive learners to enter higher studies, but also to shaping the social and economic progress of the nation. But the secondary stage continues to suffer from a variety of structural, pedagogic, and infrastructural issues which could seriously jeopardize the stage it holds. Addressing these issues effectively holds the key to ensuring differential access, quality of instruction, and system coherence. A judicious analysis of these persisting issues thus becomes inevitable for the identification of gaps, the justification of policy decisions, and the facilitating of effective remedial steps to strengthen the secondary sector of India.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study's overarching goal is to critically analyze India's secondary school system's major problems and structural weaknesses. Through the consolidation of understanding gleaned through past studies, the study aims at identifying major areas of difficulties warranting focused policy responses and system reform

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IV. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

This study used a systematic review approach to synthesize current literature about the issues of secondary schooling in India. The review involved the determination of common patterns, systemic problems, and local difficulties as found in previous studies. Sources were chosen according to their academic credibility and pertinence to the issue. A wide variety of literature such as books, peer-reviewed journal articles, doctoral theses, and policy briefs was used as the sample.

IV. IDENTIFICATION OF PROBLEMS IN SECONDARY EDUCATION.

1. **Problems relating to the system of secondary education.**

Researchers	Problems identified
1. Jala (1986)	The curriculum lacked real-world relevance.
2. Lall and House (2005)	Despite government policies and recommendations, practical results were often lacking.
3. Anand (2007)	While the secondary education system may appear satisfactory on the surface, it lacked relevance in today's social context. It was only limited in for wall classroom, merely transfer of information. Syllabus was not changed frequently as it was needed, the system only produce students with uncertain future.
4. Kingdon (2007)	Significant interstate variation in the inequality of access to secondary education. Participation in secondary education remains limited and unevenly distributed. Inequality of access to secondary education.
5. Remadevi (2008)	The existing curriculum lacked practical relevance, resulting in student dissatisfaction.
6. Mitra (2017)	Despite the acknowledgment of secondary education's significance, it stands as the weakest link within the educational continuum. The precise scope and objectives of secondary education have failed to be definitively outlined. The study also deliberated on one of the significant drawbacks of the Indian secondary education system – the excessive emphasis on grades, resulting in student discontentment and disillusionment.
7. Singh (2017)	Quality of education was poor, provincial lop-sidedness, debasement in education, and corruption in the Indian education framework. Value education and women's education was not given importance. The secondary education curriculum was deemed unsatisfactory due to inconsistencies in syllabi and limited subject diversity.
8. Mondal (2018)	The management of secondary education was difficult due to a lack of personnel, frequent changes in policy, and the privatization of education became popular.
9. Kapur (2018)	The paper also addressed the discrepancy between schooling and true education, pointing out the worsening learning crisis.
10. Windlass (2019)	These challenges encompassed difficulties in curriculum management arising from knowledge gaps stemming from prior learning, particularly noticeable in the transition from elementary to secondary education. Furthermore, a substantial number of students faced learning gaps, compounded by the intense pressure of board exams, leading to diminished enthusiasm for learning. The emphasis on rote memorization driven by board exams hindered educational quality.
11. Ansari (2020)	The main problem of secondary education is its aimlessness and it is not related and oriented with daily life situation. Lack of manpower training, lack of professional training, lack of value education, curriculum, etc. inadequate educational quality stood as another shortfall, as the system failed to nurture

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	imaginative thinking, critical analysis, and the capacity to make informed judgments. Absence of opportunities for developing essential life skills, including communication, decision-making, leadership, and problem-solving capabilities.
9. Miglani (2020)	Secondary education had been a neglected sector within the realm of Indian school education. secondary education consistently failed to receive the same level of priority, particularly in terms of financial considerations.
10. Kaleem and Akhtar(2021)	Qualitative growth was not found in comparison to quantitative growth in the sector. Universalization of secondary education was not highly achieved.
12. Deb (2021)	The study highlighted that while there has been a rapid increase in the quantity of schools, the improvements made have been primarily quantitative. This has resulted in an unsatisfactory enhancement in quality.
13. Sardar (2021)	Quality education did not exist due to corruption, value education was not given priority, curriculum was insignificant.
14. Parbin (2022)	Curriculum was insignificant as it was not life related, it did not meet the individual needs, it was not implemented in practical level and it did not have proper aims. The examination system was burden for students. Allotment of funds was low.
15. Singh (2022)	Schemes of RMSA was not fully executed in some parts. Irregular scrutiny from authorities and lack of qualified teachers hinder the management of secondary education.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The literature reviewed consistently underscores that secondary education in India is one of the most poorly managed segments within the educational hierarchy. Despite being a critical bridge between elementary schooling and higher education, it suffers from neglect in both planning and execution. A recurring theme across studies is the inadequate budgetary allocation for secondary education, which has restricted the development of meaningful infrastructure, teaching quality, and student support services.

While there has been notable quantitative expansion—with more schools established and increased student enrollment—research shows this growth has not translated into qualitative improvements. The quality of education continues to suffer, principally due to factors such as corruption, unfair management, as well as irregular monitoring, specifically in some state scenarios. A key problem comprises the lack of explicit aims as well as practical relevance in the curriculum. Several studies reflect how the curriculum lacks relevance to real-life issues as well as does not instill relevant skills. Failing to promote life-preparedness as well as critical thinking, secondary schooling instead emphasizes rote memories as well as abstract knowledge. As a result, students could excel academically yet lack work-readiness or daily problem-solving skills. Moreover, the system of examinations continues to place undue stress on students, increasing a regime of excessive pressure, nervous tension, as well as, in several cases, mental illness. That has resulted in the context wherein academic success comes to mean simply the product of examinations, discounting the general progress as well as the well-being of the student. Extramural activities, which could have neutralized such academic pressure, are widely undervalued or nonexistent in several regions. Failure to universalize secondary schooling forms another serious problem. Through policy guidelines as well as schemes for inclusive schooling, the process may seem conducive, yet the accessibility continues to be uneven as well as unfair—specifically for the marginalized/rural population. Adding the ills, several well-meaning policies as well as initiatives continue to languish as ineffective at the grass-roots level. In numerous cases, initiatives exist only on paper, with minimal evidence of actual benefit reaching the students. Taken together, these findings highlight a serious misalignment between policy intent and on-ground realities. A system that continues to produce academically competent yet practically unprepared students, who are often burdened by emotional stress and unemployment, cannot be considered successful. For secondary education to truly serve its transitional role, there is an urgent need to build a value-driven, skill-oriented, and accessible system that prepares learners for both academic and life challenges. This calls for a visionary overhaul rooted in practical relevance, mental well-being, and equity.

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V. PROBLEMS RELATING TO STUDENTS AND TEACHERS.

Researchers	Problems identified
1. Dev (1979)	Due to lack of mastery of subjects, teachers were weak in questioning skills.
2.Tali (1984)	Teachers faced problems in areas like dealing with students, working with staff, colleagues and higher authorities. Government school teachers faced problems frequently than private schools teachers.
3. Jala (1986)	Many teachers have excessive class periods. Workload of teachers was not distributed equally and discrimination was fond among female teachers.
4. Vijayalakshmi(2005)	Problems of students included, a feeling of unappreciated and unrecognized, teachers insincerity, discrimination among tribal students, inadequate learning facilities like books, long distance of schools, language and communication barriers.
5. Maiti (2006)	Students faced problems due to poor socio economic backgrounds of the family
6. Rani (2007)	Poverty, poor socio-economic backgrounds and inadequate facilities.
7. Reddy (2007)	Rural students were unable to access secondary education like urban students.
8. Bige(2009)	Gender disparity and background of students such as tribal and non-tribal areas affect the academic achievements of students.
9. Lamare (2010)	Heavy workload of teachers, salary problems and irregularity of teachers.
10. Biswal (2011)	Students from backward classes did not participate much in education. Different locations, gender and socio economic backgrounds causes problems in accessibility.
11. Chiinkhanniang(2011)	Emotional problems, health and hygiene problems, infrastructure problems, social problems and language problems were found among students.
12. Willy (2011)	Shortage of qualified teachers and heavy workloads of teachers were the main problems. Low enrolment of students was found which was due to poor socio-economic backgrounds, negative view towards government schools etc.
13. Roland (2013)	Students felt that teachers showed favoritism and biasedness among students. Exam questions were not set on application level, heavy workload and limited amount of time was another problems.
14. Reema (2017)	Shortage of qualified teachers, lack of teachers training, language barriers and infrastructure inadequacy.
15. Daikho(2019)	Teaching learning materials were not properly used by teachers, many teachers did not finished the syllabus. Students faced difficulty due to poor infrastructure facilities like transportation, drinking facility, etc.
16. . Tok and Boli (2019)	Students faced problems in secondary school because they were not prepared enough in elementary school.
17. Bandyopadhay and Chugh(2020)	Due to poor socio economic backgrounds, many students were unable to afford their education. Teachers were not given enough training, they did not get much support from community, and unwanted behavior of students.
18. Barman (2020)	Problems like unsatisfactory hostel facilities, low opportunity and enrolment for students in remote areas, and high drop-out rates, language barriers, illiteracy, poverty etc.
19. Raut(2020)	Female teachers were not in proportionate with female students.

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20. Mahajan (2021)	Scarcity of resources, barriers of religious and social standards, distance of schools, lack of awareness about education, poor communication and communication skills, less opportunity, lack of guidance and direction and gender disparity.
21. Sardar (2021)	Insincere and irregular teachers, misbehavior of students, negative society attitude towards government schools. The decline in educational quality attributed to corruption. The study underscored the lack of emphasis on value education,
22. Sehjal (2021)	Teachers in rural and urban areas showed differences in terms of their teaching and effectiveness.

Findings and Discussion

One of the major impediments to the effective expansion of secondary education in India lies in the multitude of challenges faced by students and teachers. A recurring theme across studies is the persistent gap in opportunity and accessibility between rural and urban areas. These inequalities are then exacerbated by India's cultural and social diversity, wherein variations in tribe, caste, economic privilege, and location all impact teacher effectiveness as much as they do students' work.

Numerous studies have been prominent in identifying that rural students, tribal communities, and disadvantaged socio-economic groups have greater barriers to participation and attainment at secondary school. Enrolments are low and drop-out rates are high as a result of poverty, distance, lack of family support, and deficient infrastructure, particularly for disadvantaged rural areas. Language and communication difficulties are common among students, which influence their academic achievement and sense of belonging to the school environment. Reports by students of exclusion, lack of acknowledgement, and treatment with bias are of most significant concern, as these practices can significantly impact their motivation and well-being.

Teachers themselves have significant problems. Several studies reflect the lack of coherent professional development prospects and weak pre- and in-service training, which have a negative influence on the quality of the classroom. Unfair workloads, uneven task distribution, the absence of economic resources, and ineffective school administration support have discouraged teachers and lowered their effectiveness. Female teachers, particularly, are likely to endure an uneven ratio of issues and discrimination in the workplace.

Interpersonal issues such as problems cooperating with peers, accommodating discipline, or adjusting to authority at a higher level make the school environment even more challenging. Unqualified and improperly trained teachers, overwhelmingly found in rural schools, directly impede the mission of providing equitable and quality education to all learners.

A focused strategy must be adopted to overcome these complex challenges. Teachers must be recognized for their efforts and provide regular, structured professional development. Adequate infrastructure and academic support must be ensured for students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Moreover, secondary education should move beyond mere academic instruction to incorporate life-related and job-oriented learning, equipping students with the skills necessary for personal growth and future employability.

VI. PROBLEMS RELATING TO INFRASTRUCTURE FACILITIES.

Researchers	Problem identified
1. Deka (1991)	Teaching aids and teaching learning materials were inadequate.
2. Satrusallya (1991)	Co-curricular facilities were not provided enough.
3. Lalsangliani (1999)	Inadequacy of textbooks and facilities.
4. Kumari (2005)	Private unaided schools have better infrastructure facilities than private schools. Classroom facilities, internet, laboratories, libraries etc were better in private schools due to the swift of schools from government to private schools.
5. Remadevi (2008)	Unsatisfactory staff room facilities like almirahs, toilets, fans etc., poor classroom facilities like electricity, fans, etc., and inadequate co-curricular facilities for indoor and outdoor games.

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6. Suresh (2010)	Infrastructural facilities were far from satisfactory. Government schools have better facilities than private schools. Classroom infrastructure, libraries, laboratories etc., were unsatisfactory.
7. Mylliemngap(2011)	Inadequate transportation facility and hostel facilities was inconvenient.
8. Nyokir (2011)	Poor school building, furniture, funding, non-availability of teaching materials and teaching aids.
9. Pratichi institute and UNICEF (2013)	Inaccessibility, some schools faced shortage of classrooms, teachers, laboratories, libraries, and ICT infrastructures.
10. Dash (2015)	Inadequate facilities such as separate toilets for boys and girls, no platform for CCE activities like sports, and school building.
11. Saikia (2016)	Most secondary schools did not have sufficient land, classroom, furniture, playgrounds, libraries, laboratories, etc.
12. Reema (2017)	Computer infrastructure facilities were not adequate. Budget allocation was not sufficient for computer based examination.
13. Umesh and Sivakumar (2018)	Insufficient infrastructural facilities such as buildings, separate toilets, laboratories, playgrounds, libraries etc.
14. Windlass (2019).	Lack of ICT infrastructures such as projectors, internet facilities, and skills training for students in using the same.
15. Barman (2020)	Numerous schools lacked essential resources, including adequate library facilities and dedicated common rooms for teachers.
16. Kapur (2020)	Inadequate teaching learning materials and teaching aids, poor infrastructure facilities etc.
17. Das (2022)	Unsatisfactory infrastructure facilities in rural and urban areas which included inadequate toilets, drinking water facilities, books in libraries etc.
18. Mahakur (2022)	Some teachers in government schools have problems in science subject due to inaccessibility of science laboratories.
19. Mohalik and Sethy (2022)	Most schools did not even meet the minimum standards like toilets, power supply etc.

Findings and Discussion

The body of research consistently reveals that insufficient infrastructure is a pervasive issue in India's secondary schools. Shortages of essential resources—such as adequate classroom space, reliable drinking water, functional laboratories, and well-stocked libraries—are widespread. Equally troubling is the absence of separate sanitation facilities for boys and girls in many institutions, which undermines both student safety and attendance, particularly for female learners.

Additionally, the lack of teaching resources exacerbates these problems; when resource materials are available, teachers themselves are not adequately trained to utilize them. In the information age, the inadequacy of ICT infrastructure restricted access to computers, projectors, and internet connections yet further impedes reforming pedagogy and equipping students for the demands of the modern age.

These infrastructure gaps collectively significantly inhibit quality education, contributing to lower student engagement, achievement gaps, and teacher stress. Addressing these gaps through targeted investments in infrastructure and incentives for maintenance and professional development can help improve secondary school outcomes all over India.

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CONCLUSION

This report highlights how, despite the abundance of policies and reform programs directed at India's secondary schools, genuine advances are impossible without the effective implementation. Systemic defects in the curriculum and teacher scarcities are commonplace, as are profound infrastructure gaps. The next phase of reform must go now, after identifying "what" the issues are, and designing and implementing tangible plans for "how" to fix them.

Education authorities and policy-makers must prioritize translating policy into practice through the availability of adequate funding, systems of accountability, and capacity-building initiatives. Investment in teacher education, physical and information infrastructure, and refreshing the curriculum and assessments must be planned and monitored vigorously. Only through such focused and sustained effort can India's system of secondary schools truly deliver the promise of enabling the youth to possess the skills, knowledge, and questioning attitude necessary for thriving in the 21st century.

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