

Education, growth and development : The nature, extent and the impact of school dropouts in India

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ABSTRACT

Provision of education is unquestionably the paramount important factor to attain higher social and economic development. However, rate of dropout is not consistent among the different sections of the society. This paper analyses the nature, extent and also the reasons for dropout among different categories of the population with the help of official data. This study shows that the percentage of those who never attended is small, while the percentage of those who dropped out is alarmingly high. There are inter-spatial variations in education not only among the states, but also between rural and urban areas. The major reasons for dropout were the high schooling costs, lack of interest in studies and children being withdrawn in order to contribute to the household income. These problems need to be addressed immediately to tackle the problem of dropout. This is particularly important from the viewpoint of the already deprived and vulnerable sections of the society like female population, scheduled caste and scheduled tribe population and also the rural population.

KEY WORDS : School dropouts, Growth and development, Education

Ramesh, K. (2011). Education, growth and development : The nature, extent and the impact of school dropouts in India, *Adv. Res. J. Soc. Sci.*, 2 (1) : 124-130.

The concept and phenomenon of education is of modern origin, not only in India, but also in the developing countries and the West. It is only with the emergence of the industrial revolution, that children's education based on school going received a boost in the West. In India too, contemporary education draws from Western origins. The British laid the foundation of modern education in India. Macaulay's Policy of 1835, Sir Charles Wood's Dispatch of 1854 and the Indian Education Commission were the major historical landmarks. The educational organization that emerged gradually possibly will be classified into primary, high school / secondary school and college / university education. Primary education (taught in the regional language) remained neglected while higher education (taught in English) received a fillip. The neglect of the primary education continued till it became a provincial subject. Thus, the modern education system in India, started by the British, remained the preserve of the upper castes and the urban, high and rich classes with a heavy slant on higher education. With India gaining independence, the government attempted to extend the reach of primary education to the masses, particularly in the rural areas. Thus, universalisation of elementary

education became an accepted concept and a national project. This paper analyses the nature, extent and the impact of dropout in India with the help of official data published by the Census of India, NSSO and also the NFHS survey.

Opportunity cost of child's time:

According to the data from the 2001 census, of the 203 million children in the 6-14 age group, there exist about 110 million children who are considered out of school. Data on labour force participation from 2001 census puts the number of working children as 11.28 million. The number of out of school children is however far in excess of the number of working children. This is because the census recognizes only full time work with wages as labour. Researchers are now asking questions about the nearly 100 million children (of whom nearly 60% are girls) who are out of school but not counted as child labourers. (Jha and Jhingran, 2002; Caldwell *et al.*, 1985; Ramachandran, 2003). This vast majority of unaccounted children appear to be engaged in family labour assisting in domestic work at home or in the farm without wages. For such part time child workers, engaged in family labour, work may still

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not be compatible with schooling (*Probe Report*, 1999).

Gender:

Almost all the studies recognize the role of the girl child as invisible child labour at home. Ananda Lakshmy notes that irrespective of economic status, the female child's role in household work and cooking is constant (*Ananda Lakshmy in Karlekar, 2000*). Studies show that girls spend twice or even sometimes thrice as much time working than boys, mostly on domestic duties. Some studies reveal that the birth order determines the educational chances of the girl child (Chanana, 1988; Nayar, 1993).

Age:

Empirical studies also show that the nature of work done by children differs according to age. The pattern of children's work, across the study villages in Jha and Jhingran's study was as follows: while, the younger boys (6-9 years) are utilized for cattle grazing and collecting forest produce, the older boys (9-13 years) are utilized for seasonal work on their own farm, or for agricultural wage work. Younger girls (6-9 years) were involved in sibling care and household work and in forest produce collection and older girls (9-13 years) also worked on the family farm and were involved in agricultural farm work with their mothers.

Findings from Kanbargi's study demonstrate that children performed a variety of activities useful to the family from a very young age. However, the demand on their time becomes stronger as children grow older and are capable of more productive work. While younger boys tended livestock, the older boys between 12-14 years, working for wages was more common (Kanbargi and Kulkarni, 1991). Vimala Ramachandran's study of the three states of U.P, A.P, and Karnataka finds that socio-economic participation of children in household activities seemed to be far ahead of age expectations. She found even very young children in the age group of 3-6 years taking on the responsibility for a range of sibling care / household and farm activities.

Seasonality:

A feature of farming on small land holdings is that it becomes uneconomical to hire paid labour, and hence most families perform all agricultural operations themselves. At the time of sowing / harvesting, all members including the children are engaged. Studies show that in many families there is a high dependence on full time child work during peak agricultural activity, such as sowing and harvesting, during which time children are withdrawn from school.

Many authors thus recommend flexibility in school calendar and timings so that these don't clash with the agricultural activity in rural areas (*Probe Report*, 1999; Shariff, 1991).

Supply of family labour:

Certain studies have found that certain changes in the composition of the family labour causes children to be withdrawn from school and they are discontinued till the supply of family labour force becomes adequate. Caldwell *et al's* study of rural Karnataka shows how young girls may be withdrawn as elder sisters are married, grandparents are disabled or mothers become pregnant. Young boys may end schooling as an elder brother goes to town to seek work. The 55th round of the NSSO survey (2004-05) also found that about 18 to 20 % of working children in rural areas reported 'Shortage of labour' in household enterprise as reason for their working.

Child labour, poverty, land ownership:

A number of studies go to show that there is a positive link between child labour and land ownership. Studies by Kanbargi and Kulkarni (1991) highlight the relation between agriculture and its demand for child labour, which varies between land owning and landless families. Children are more likely to be employed as family help and in productive work in households that own land, cattle or other productive assets. Among the landless, on the other hand, not having cattle or land greatly reduces demand for children in productive work. Hence, children of landless labourers are freed from labour on the farm, and thus can attend school (Bhatty, 1998; Reddy and Reddy, 1992).

Dropout and literacy level:

At the time of independence, India's primary education was characterized by the historical inequities. Though Article 45 of the Directive Principles of the State Policy was committed to ensuring free and compulsory education for all, this did not significantly translate into action and school enrolments and participation remained dismally low for decades after independence. However, the picture of elementary education in rural India began to change rapidly due to the new thrusts given by the government's New National Policy of Education (1986) and the Programme of Action (1992), which aimed at improving access, reducing drop outs and improving learning achievements for all children between 6-14 years of age. A host of major initiatives by the government, and the mobilization of external resources for primary education, had a deep impact on the status of primary education, in India. Some of the important initiatives have

been the Operation Blackboard (1986), the Shiksha Karmi Project (1987), LokJumbish (1992), the District Primary Education Programme (1994), the Mid Day Meal scheme (1995) and the Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (2001), which aimed at completion of eight years of schooling by all children between 6-14 years, by 2010. Elementary education being made a fundamental right by the 83rd Constitutional Amendment, and the Supreme Court's insistence on States to provide hot cooked meals in schools, are improving enrolments.

Gross enrolment over the years:

There has been a decline, in the number of out of school children over the years, which has been brought out in the 1991 and 2001 Census data (Table 1). The 1991 data showed 67.5% of the 6-14 age children as attending school, while the 2001 data revealed 79% of the same category as attending school. However, rates of successful completion of primary schooling still fall way behind the

Table 1 : School attendance of 6-14 age girls

States	1991	2001	Difference
Andhra Pradesh	54.8%	70.5%	15.7
Assam	66.0%	75.0%	9.0
Bihar	38.3%	54.1%	15.8
Gujarat	68.4%	72.8%	4.4
Haryana	74.7%	85.5%	10.8
Karnataka	64.4%	77.6%	13.2
Kerala	94.8%	97.4%	2.6
Madhya Pradesh	54.8%	70.8%	16.0
Maharashtra	76.6%	86.9%	10.3
Orissa	62.0%	75.1%	13.1
Punjab	77.8%	90.0%	12.2
Rajasthan	40.6%	63.2%	22.6
Tamil Nadu	78.7%	88.5%	9.8
Uttar Pradesh	48.2%	69.4%	21.2
West Benaal	62.9%	76.7%	13.8

Source: Census of India, 2001.

desired level. With reference to learning achievements, however, statistics indicate that the performance of boys and girls has been dismal, with most having low achievement scores. This shows that in fact, little learning is taking place. Children seem to be progressing in the primary classes in fact on account account of the policy of non-detention. Table 2, showing the dropping enrolment scenario, is a pointer to the low learning taking place, as most children are not completing the grades for which they are enrolled.

The improved literacy scenario, as brought out by

Table 2 : Declining enrolment scenario, 2006-07 (in Million)

Class	Boys	Girls	Total
Class - I	17.1	13.4	30.5
Class - II	13.4	10.4	23.8
Class - III	12.2	9.6	21.8
Class - IV	11.0	8.6	19.6
Class - V	10.2	7.8	18.0
Class - VI	9.4	6.6	16.0
Class - VII	8.3	5.9	14.2
Class - VIII	7.6	5.0	12.6
Class - IX	6.2	4.0	10.2
Class - X	5.4	3.4	8.8
Class - XI	2.4	1.6	4.0
Class - XII	2.1	1.4	3.5

Source: Selected Educational Statistics, 2007

the 2001 census, shows the tangible progress in the sphere of primary education as well as in increasing literacy levels among adults. For the first time since India's independence, there has been a decline in the number of non-literates from 328 million in 1991 to 296 million in 2001. Male literacy was 75.85% and female literacy was 54.16% in 2001. Female literacy improved over the decade from 39.29% in 1991 to 54.16% in 2001; male-female literacy gap has come down from 24.84% to 21.70% in 2001.

India lags behind in primary education:

It has been widely acknowledged that the socio-economic conditions in rural India have constrained the process of primary education and the social inequalities of caste, class and gender have been identified as the major causes of educational deprivation among children in India. Educational disparities, which contribute a great deal to the persistence of massive inequalities in Indian society, also largely derive from more fundamental inequalities such as those of class, caste and gender.

A large proportion of children from the economically poor and socially disadvantaged groups and girls, especially in rural areas, are either denied access or are failing to complete even five years of basic education. The goal of universal elementary education remains a challenge to achieve even after five decades of independence. As noted earlier, the focus has now shifted from enrolments to Primary School completion, but gains in enrolment do not show as gains in grade completion. The NFHS II survey brought out that only 56% boys and 43% girls in the 15-19 years age group had completed elementary education. It is disturbing to note that despite improvements in enrolment rates, dropouts continue to remain high. Census 2001 shows that while Gross Enrolment Ratios were 95.17%

for children, the Gross Dropout rates were 40.7% (Table 3).

The Tapas Majumdar Committee Report (1999) has estimated the size of out of school children to be about 60-70 million. NSSO data on out of school children aged between 5-14 years, reveals that while the percentage of those who never attended is small, the percentage of those who dropped out is alarmingly high. Vast variations exist between states in their efforts to provide eight years of elementary schooling. While in states like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Himachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Maharashtra, nearly all children have reached school and are remaining there, in other states like Bihar, Orissa and Uttar Pradesh, a very significant number continue to be out school. The school attendance of children aged 6-17 years is more

than 90% in Himachal Pradesh and Kerala, and 85-90% in Goa, Delhi, Manipur, Mizoram and Punjab. Overall school attendance at 60% is the lowest in Bihar and is also 70% or lower in Rajasthan, Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh. The spread of education has been uneven not only in terms of inter state variations, but also between rural and urban areas, with urban areas being at an advantage compared to the rural areas. Social inequalities of caste, class and gender have manifested themselves in primary school participation and completion, as a result of which, certain segments of society, such as the SCs, STs, and girls in rural areas, have continued to lag behind the general population (Table 4). We now see how these three gaps manifest themselves in the sphere of primary education.

Table 3 : Drop-out rates at primary, middle and secondary stages

	1960-61	1970-71	1980-81	1990-91	1992-93	1999-00	2000-01
Classes I - V							
Boys	61.7	64.5	56.2	40.1	43.8	38.7	39.7
Girls	70.9	70.9	62.5	46.0	46.7	42.3	41.9
Total	64.9	67.0	58.7	42.6	45.0	40.3	40.7
Classes I - VIII							
Boys	75.0	74.6	68.0	59.1	58.2	52.0	50.3
Girls	85.0	83.4	79.4	65.1	65.2	58.0	57.7
Total	78.3	77.9	72.7	60.9	61.1	54.5	53.7

Source: Selected Educational Statistics 2001

Table 4 : All India: Percentage of out-of-school children in the age group of 5-14, NSS 60th round, 2004-05

Social group	Dropped out			Never attended		
	5-9	10-14	5-14	5-9	10-14	5-14
Rural male						
SC	36.1	28.5	32.7	4.0	2.9	3.5
ST	42.5	35.8	39.4	3.2	3.1	3.1
Others	26.8	18.2	22.6	3.7	2.7	3.2
All	30.4	22.0	26.4	3.7	2.8	3.3
Urban male						
SC	24.9	15.1	20.1	2.1	3.4	2.7
ST	19.3	17.1	18.3	3.4	3.2	3.3
Others	12.3	11.2	11.8	2.6	1.9	2.2
All	14.4	11.9	13.2	2.5	2.1	2.3
Rural female						
SC	48.4	51.6	49.9	4.3	4.1	4.2
ST	55.9	55.8	55.9	4.0	3.2	3.7
Others	35.6	36.4	36.0	3.9	3.4	3.7
All	40.5	41.3	40.8	4.0	3.5	3.8
Urban female						
SC	29.0	28.0	28.5	3.1	3.2	3.2
ST	30.8	21.1	25.9	5.2	4.6	4.9
Others	15.1	14.7	14.9	2.9	2.8	2.8
All	17.6	16.6	17.1	3.0	2.9	3.0

Source: NSSO, 2006

Class:

Large scale survey-based statistics reveal that the majority of in-school children are from economically better off sections, while the majority of out of school children belong to poorer households. Analysis of enrolment patterns for different income groups from the NFHS data show that only half the children in the bottom 40% households were studying in schools as against more than 90% in the top 20%.

The NSSO data also revealed similar disparities in primary school enrolments between the poorest 20% and the richest 20% in rural India (Table 5).

Table 5 : Proportion of 6 to 14 year-olds currently "in school"

Economic group	Proportion of 6 to 14 year olds currently "in school" (%)
Bottom 40%	50.0
Middle 40%	76.7
Top 20%	94.2

Source: Calculated from NFHS III data 2004-05

Gender:

In India, the gender gap has persisted in primary schooling, right since independence. Though the situation continues to improve, girls still have had lower enrolments, lower attendance rates, as well as higher drop out rates, compared to boys. Gross Enrolment Ratios of 2001 census shows that while 90.3% of the boys were enrolled in the elementary level, only 72.4% of the girls were enrolled. With regard to school attendance rates, the proportion of boys attending school is higher compared to girls in both rural and urban areas and across most states, as brought out in the NFHS II. 50% of the school age girls in Bihar were not attending school, as against 68% of the boys who attended. School attendance of girls was also low in Rajasthan, at 56%, as against 81 % of boys who attended school. In Uttar Pradesh, 61% girls attended (as against 77% boys) and in Andhra Pradesh 61 % girls attended (as against 73% boys).

Disparity in school attendance by sex increases with the age of the children. While in the 6-10 years age group, 85% boys and 78% girls attended school, by the age of 15-17 years, 58% boys and only 40% girls attended school. More girls than boys tend to drop out of school at all levels. Dropouts tend to go up as girls move to middle and secondary levels of schooling. Though the drop out rates has been declining over the years, even a modest gap means that more females than males join ranks of persons with incomplete primary education. The gender gap shows up in a much more focused way when comparisons are made of completion rates, instead of enrolments. As against

44.4% of women of age 15-49 years completing primary education, there were 68.9% men in the same category in 1998-99 (NFHS II).

Caste:

Census, NSSO and NCAER data all show that members of schedule castes and schedule tribes, who have been historically disadvantaged socially, economically and educationally, have had lower school participation in terms of enrolment and retention compared to the general population. The 1981 and 1991 census data show that crude literacy rates for both men and women belonging to SC and ST were significantly lower compared to the general population.

In recent years, educational statistics on primary Gross Enrolment Rates of SC children are shown as significantly higher, as revealed by the 2001 census, where 96.8% of SC children were reported as enrolled in primary classes. These figures strongly suggest over-reporting of SC enrolments (World Bank Report, 1997). More reliable information can be sourced from the 'India Human Department Report' of NCAER 1999. The ever-enrolled rates for SCs and STs were 61.8% that is about 10% less than that of the general Hindu population.

Data available from census and surveys clearly point out that SC and ST children have lower school attendance and higher drop out rates compared to the general population. According to the 1991 census, less than 50% of SC male children were attending school in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal. Among SC girls, the proportion attending school was less than 50% in all of the states except Himachal Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Gujarat. The situation is even more dismal for ST children.

NSSO data on out-of-school children show that dropouts are much higher among rural girls of SC and ST communities, when compared to the general population. Approximately 50% of SC and 56% of ST girls dropped out of school compared to 36% from the 'others' category. NFHS II data found that women's educational attainment varies widely by caste and tribe. While 44% women of general category were illiterate, 73% of ST women and 79% of SC women were reported as illiterate. ST women, followed by SC women, are less likely than other women to have completed primary or middle school (NFHS II). Educational attainments of SC and ST children may indeed have improved between 1991 and 2001, but recent data regarding this is not yet available.

Reasons for dropping out:

Apart from empirical studies, a number of surveys

have also been conducted by the NSSO as well as NFHS to collect information on reasons for non-attendance in school by children. Data from NSSO shows that for both boys and girls, the cost of schooling is cited most often as the main reason for never attending school. For nearly 50% of boys from both rural and urban areas, high cost as well as a lack of interest in studies was predominant reasons for never having attended school.

For girls on the other hand, along with costs of education, their contribution to household work was given as reasons for non-enrolment. For nearly 13% of the girls from rural areas, education was perceived as unnecessary. For children dropping out of school, the major reasons appeared to be a lack of interest in studies in the case of nearly 40% of the boys and 25% of the girls. Another major reason was that boys and girls were needed for work both inside and outside the home (Table 6).

Thus, the three prominent reasons that emerged from the survey for non-attendance by children were (1) High schooling costs, referring to hidden costs of books, stationery and clothes; (2) Lack of interest in studies which could stem from a number of reasons, from an inconducive home environment to a poor quality schooling system; and (3) As far as work is concerned, it could be possible that children are withdrawn because they are needed to contribute to the household income. Equally possible could

be the fact that they are engaged in household activity, after dropping out.

Poverty, school attendance and learning outcomes:

Research has also shown that even when poor children manage to enrol and attend school, they do not escape the burden of work resulting from poverty. As they seek to combine both school and work, the result is that their levels of learning and achievement are affected and do not reach their full potential. Olga Niewhuy's study indicates how children work in their spare time to support their families. This dual workload of school and work may be detrimental to their education, development, health and safety.

Ramachandran's (2003) study of three states finds that the intensity of poverty is such that many children above 6, attending government schools, reported working before as well as after school hours. They were also engaged in full time work during peak seasons, holidays and weekends. The implications of this phenomenon on primary schooling were that:

- Most children did not get sufficient time to revise their books / lessons, especially older girls on whom the major work responsibility fell. Their poor nutritional status also compounded the problem, by lowering energy levels, and affecting concentration levels.

Table 6 : Children aged 6 -17 years, Reasons for never attending or dropping out of school, 2004-05

Reasons	Males		Females	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
Never attended school:				
School far away	1.5	4.4	3.4	5.2
Education not necessary	6.1	7.8	12.9	13.1
Required for work at home or	12.6	17.1	15.4	24.5
Costs too much	28.5	25.8	30.1	23.8
Not interested in studies	26.5	25.7	15.7	15.9
Other	26.5	17.0	19.7	15.4
Don't know	3.0	2.0	2.8	2.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Dropped out of school:				
School far away	0.3	1.4	1.2	7.5
Education not necessary	2.4	2.3	5.4	4.3
Required for work at home or	21.9	28.4	20.8	26.2
Costs too much	15.2	13.3	17.0	11.4
Not interested in studies	42.5	40.0	30.2	24.8
Repeated failures	6.0	5.3	6.1	3.7
Other *	5.9	5.5	14.3	18.2
Don't know	5.7	3.8	5.1	4.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note: * In the case of girls, this category also includes reasons such as lack of proper school facilities for girls and marriage, among those who dropped out.

Source: NSSO, 2006

– The pressure of morning chores was such that many children especially girls reported not having time to eat before attending school, and in Andhra Pradesh several girls drank only water in the mornings. Lack of a proper meal before school negatively affects the child's performance and its ability to learn new concepts.

Studies also show that poor performance and learning outcomes among children from poor economic backgrounds has an adverse impact on their continuation. Ramachandran's research has found that in U.P, children of class 2, who could not recognize the alphabets, or of class 3 who were unable to read / write, were immediately withdrawn from school, by their parents. Comments such as 'what is the use of sending him to school?' pulled him out after class 4 and he now helps me with my work' were common. Caldwell *et al.* (1985) note from the sample that poor learning leads to immediate withdrawal from school, this being seen as an investment turned sour. Combining the two factors of poverty and poor performance, the author classifies four categories of dropouts:

- Poor performers with sound economic base.
- Poor performers with weak economic base (who drop out at an early age for e.g. class 1)
- Good performers with weak economic base, who may continue for sometime due to good performance or drop out due to economic compulsions.

Conclusion:

This study has brought out the facts that the percentage of those who never attended is small according to the NSSO data, while the percentage of those who dropped out is alarmingly high. However, there are huge variations between states in their efforts to provide eight years of elementary schooling. The school attendance of children aged 6-17 years is quite high in Himachal Pradesh and Kerala (more than 90%), and 85-90% in Goa, Delhi, Manipur, Mizoram and Punjab. There are inter-spatial variations in education not only among the states, but also between rural and urban areas, with urban areas being at an advantage compared to the rural areas. Moreover, it is also clear that disparity in school attendance by sex increases with the age of the children. Dropouts tend to go up as girls move to middle and secondary levels of schooling. Though the dropout rates have been declining over the years, even a modest gap means that more females than males join ranks of persons with incomplete primary education.

The three major reasons that emerged for non-attendance by children were (1) High schooling costs, referring to hidden costs of books, stationery and clothes;

(2) Lack of interest in studies which could stem from a number of reasons, from an inconducive home environment to a poor quality schooling system; and (3) As far as work is concerned, it could be possible that children are withdrawn because they are needed to contribute to the household income. Equally possible could be the fact that they are engaged in household activity, after dropping out. These problems need to be addressed if the government is quite serious in tackling the problem of dropout among the growing children of the country. This is particularly important from the viewpoint of the already deprived and vulnerable sections of the society like female population, scheduled caste and scheduled tribe population and also the rural population.

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