



Research Paper

Achieving SDG-4 in India: To Ensure Inclusive, Equitable and Quality Education for All

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Abstract:

As a developing country, India has shown significant development in all sectors, especially in educational sector. In this way the Agenda 21 plays crucial role to increase literacy level with quality, equity and inclusive education. SDG 4 makes consistent efforts to enhance quality of education with enrolment ratio, retention and attendance of student to universalize the education in India. In this perspective the present paper aims to analyse various initiatives under SDG 4 to ensure quality education for all. And it discusses the targets and indicators of SDG4 which provides insights in to the current global situation on education.

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I. Introduction:

Sustainable Development Goals are established by United Nations to meet global standards, which are expected to be implemented nationally, typically through government agencies. The focus has been gradually shifting from a strictly economic perspective to a larger development paradigm that includes the three pillars (People, Planet, Profit) of environmental, social, and economic sustainability. As a result, education's role and its outreach initiatives, such as training and capacity building, communication, raising public awareness, scientific and applied research, sharing and access to information, networking, partnerships, etc., are becoming the main strategies for achieving the SDGs. The goal of SDG4 is to provide fair and inclusive education for everyone, which is directly linked to the effective implementation of SDG 16, which is about fostering peaceful and inclusive communities and, most importantly, establishing effective and accountable institutions at all levels. "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" is the objective of SDG 4, which includes the aim of ensuring that all boys and girls complete free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education by 2030, leading to relevant and effective learning-outcomes. SDG4 also aims to guarantee that all learners gain the knowledge and skills needed to advance sustainable development through education for sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, global citizenship, and the promotion of a culture of peace and brotherhood (Mohanty, 2019). Nonetheless, it is crucial to remember that education is carried out by numerous stakeholders in every country, and that success depends on tailoring strategies and policies to local environments, languages, and other factors. From a broader policy perspective, India is also a signatory to the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) declarations, which commit to ensuring equitable and high-quality primary education for all (Sharma et. al. 2020). Teachers, families, and non-governmental organizations provide valuable insights into how learning may be supported effectively (Wagner, 2022).

Education and Society:

Education occupies a crucial significance in development discourse. It occupies a strategic significance in the educational field as well. Education is one of the important factor in society, which brings economic stability and social prosperity. Education can strengthen economy as well as human resources of a country. It can create a poverty free nation and can relief a country from ignorance and orthodox beliefs, which are the prime obstacles in the path of development of a country. It binds all individuals together in society. Education system takes a responsibility to create healthy socialization. It reduces the existing age old social inequalities in society. Through the education a person would able to know what is wrong and what is right. In the words of Durkheim, education as an integrative and regulative mechanism that would bind people together and help them develop consciousness of their responsibilities and relationships within the wider society.

II. Literature Review:

Gunawan (2025), conducted a research work on “Revisiting the Sustainable Development Goal 4 “Quality Education”: Insights, Prospect and Recommendations”. The aim of study to explore various global challenges and prospects associated with the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by United nations with special focus on Goal 4: Quality Education. The study identified several disparities in educational access and quality across regions, emphasizing how socio-economic, geographical, political, and digital divides impede equitable learning opportunities drawing current data. The study made a comparative study of four countries including, Nigeria, India, Finland, and Japan. The study engrossed qualitative literature review methodology to collect data from a wide range of scholarly articles, institutional reports, and statistical data published between 2015 and 2025, with a particular emphasis on peer-reviewed journal articles, reports from international organizations (e.g., United Nations, UNESCO, OECD), and national policy documents and also the study employed a critical analysis and thematic categorization. The study concluded that by offering actionable recommendations, including intersectoral collaboration, inclusive education policy reforms, investment in digital infrastructure, and capacity building in under-resourced areas.

Pandey (2018), published a paper on “Achieving SDG 4 in India: Moving from Quantity to Quality Education for All”. The major aim of this paper to focus on the current approaches adopted by India to contextualise Goal 4 on education of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and its positive impacts on the Indian context to achieve quality education with the formulation of New Education Policy, as emphasised in SDG 4. Basically, it examined the current scenario of educational attainments at primary, secondary and tertiary levels in India and identified some major challenges and issues of quality and accessibility of education in different level in Indian educational sector. Positive learning outcomes, qualified teachers, close proximity to school, relevant curricula, provision of proper infrastructure including blackboards and boundary walls, safe drinking water facilities, usable toilets, MDMS are some of the important factors that enhanced the demand for quality education. The present study revealed that regardless of the RTE enactments in India and such initiatives of government, still millions of children are out of school is a matter of grave concern.

Objectives:

1. To analyse various initiatives under SDG4 to ensure quality education for all.
2. To discuss the targets and indicators of SDG4 which provides insights in to the current global situation on education.

Sustainable Development Goals (Agenda-21):

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations are landmark global appeal that follows the Millennial Development Goals (MDGs). The major goal of SDGs to establish a sustainable future and advance equality, human rights, and justice for everybody to live peacefully. This was adopted by United Nations member States in the year of 2015 after MDGs, which is a historic move towards safeguarding our future. It offers a common strategy for present and future with peace and prosperity for all people and our planet.

The SDGs are a set of 17 interconnected objectives intended to promote introspection and action on the most pressing issues facing humanity and the environment, such as inequalities (SDG 10), climate change (SDG13), peace and justice (SDG 16) and global collaboration to achieve global goals (SDG 17). These objectives and their goals recognize that ending poverty and other deprivations must be accompanied by strategies that address climate change, protect our natural environment and improve health and education, social inequalities and economic disparities.

The 17 SDGs are summarized by their short titles: No poverty (SDG 1), Zero hunger (SDG 2), Good health (SDG 3), Quality education (SDG 4), Gender equality (SDG 5), Clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), Affordable and clean energy (SDG 7), Decent work economic growth (SDG 8), Industry, innovation and infrastructure (SDG 9), Reduced inequalities (SDG 10), Sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), Responsible consumption and production (SDG 12), Climate action (SDG 13), Life below water (SDG 14), Life on land (SDG 15), Peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG 16) and Partnership for the goals (SDG 17).

India and SDG:

SDG-4: AN OVERVIEW;

Ensuring Quality, Equity and Inclusive Education:

India is also a productive stakeholder in this Sustainable Development Goals of United Nation. India has a 15-year of time frame to achieve this opportunity and to meet all of SDG4's goals for high-quality, equitable, and inclusive education. This would give the country's youth the necessary prerequisites for quality and accessibility of education to achieve at least a minimum level of proficiency in reading and math, while also making them a productive and skilled labour force for the resurgent India. But, before the SDGs were adopted on September 9, the Indian government had already implemented a number of projects and policies in India, with an

emphasis on quality and inclusiveness. In India, the Constitution mandates that free and compulsory education to be provided to all children between the ages of six to fourteen as a basic right. To this end, a number of important programs and policies have been implemented. The Ministry of Human Resource Development operates via two divisions: the Department of School Education and Literacy, which is in charge of universalizing primary education, and the Department of Higher Education, which is dedicated to building top-notch higher education facilities. The school education program in India has four phases, and pre-primary education is not included in the formal curriculum (Pandey, 2018).

Education is crucial to ensuring long-term growth throughout the world, particularly in less developed nations. The 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda's fourth aim is to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to seek and finish a quality education that will prepare them for employment and personal satisfaction. A high-quality education has a significant impact on human dignity and a decent life. The kind of knowledge necessary to address complicated topics like climate change can only be acquired through formal education. Formal education provides a route to social mobility and a way to lessen social inequality. Young people may flourish in the Fourth Industrial Revolution's high-skilled labour markets if they receive the correct training. Good education is a key component of a stable society with strong institutions. Education is essential for long-term progress, but focusing all of our resources on economic growth is insufficient to guarantee that everyone reaches their maximum potential. The pursuit of knowledge is liberating because it expands one's perspective and encourages creativity, which is a key component of self-esteem. We can all accomplish more with it and contribute more to creating a happier and healthier planet. Everyone in a society should have access to the benefits of education (Adipat and Chotikapanich, 2022).

Blueprint of SDG 4 by Niti Ayog:

- Samagra Shiksha
- New India Literacy Program
- Mid-day Meal Scheme(PM POSHAN)
- Pre and Post-Matric Scholarship Schemes for SCs
- PM SHRI (Schools for Rising India)
- Eklavya Model Residential Schools
- Rashtriya Avishkar Abhiyan (RAA)
- National Means cum Merit Certificate
- Padhe Bharat Badhe Bharat (PBBB)
- Skill strengthening for Industrial Value Enhancement (STRIVE)- EAP
- PM Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (PM- USHA)

1.16 million schools, over 156 million students and 5.7 million teachers of government and government-aided schools covered under the Samagra Shiksha Scheme on School Education 3,000 new ITIs, 7 IITs, 16 IIITs, 7 IIMs, 15 AIIMS and 390 universities were set up to promote higher learning" in the last decade The schemes for empowerment of PwD, transgender persons and particularly vulnerable tribal groups are operational to ensure that "no one is left behind" (Source: SDG INDIA INDEX 2023-24 by Niti Ayog).

SDG-4: Ensure Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education and Promote Lifelong Learning Opportunities for All:

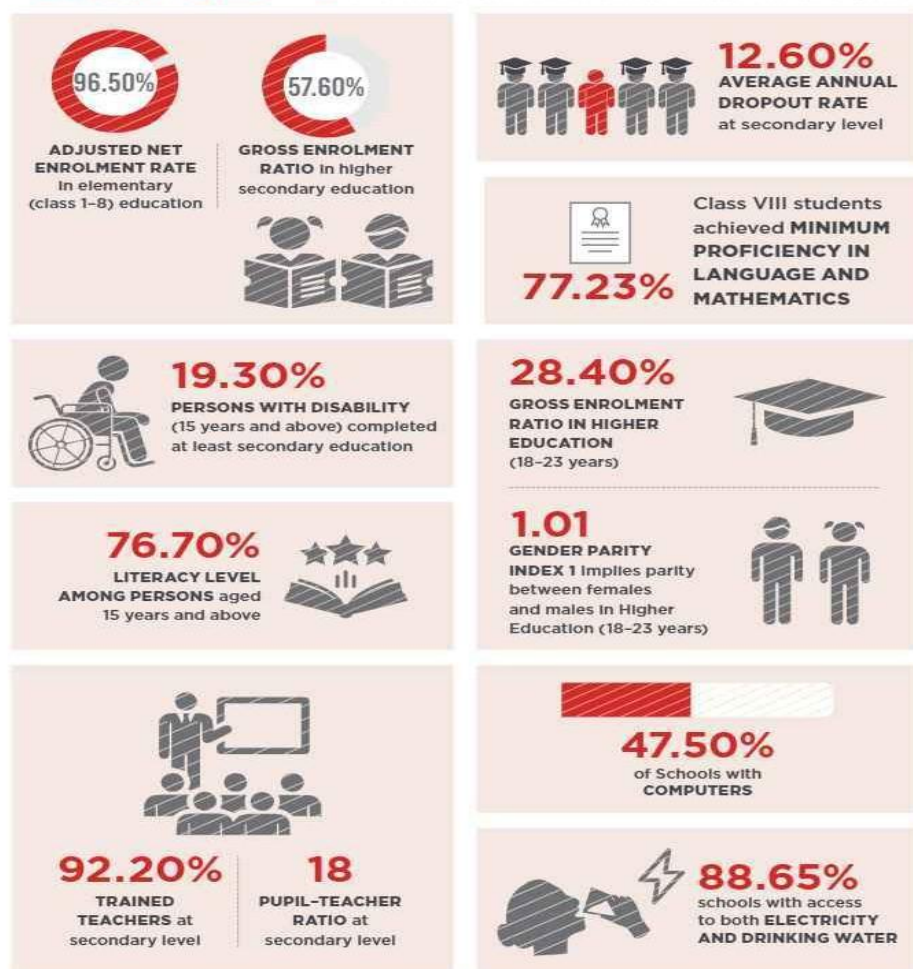
Targets:

The following breakdown of each SDG 4 target offers a glimpse into the present state of education around the world and highlights the challenges and problems associated with accomplishing each target.

- By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys finish free, equitable, and high-quality primary and secondary education that leads to relevant and Goal-4 effective learning outcomes.
- By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to high-quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education, preparing them for primary school.
- By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational, and tertiary education, including university.
- By 2030, significantly increase the number of young people and adults who possess relevant skills, such as technical and vocational abilities, for employment, decent jobs, and entrepreneurship.
- By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and children in vulnerable situations.
- By 2030, ensure that all youth and a significant proportion of adults, both men and women, are literate and numerate.

- By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development.
- By 2020, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States, and African countries, for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering, and scientific programs, in developed countries and other developing countries.
- Significantly increase the number of skilled teachers by 2030, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, particularly the least developed and small island developing nations.

GOAL 4



(Source: Niti Ayog's SDG INDEX 2023-24)

Initiatives:

1. **Target 4.1 and 4.2:** Free, equitable, accessible, and high-quality primary and secondary education with childcare development.
 1. **Right to Education Act-** On April 1, 2010, Article 21-A and the RTE Act came into effect. The RTE Act's name includes the terms "free and compulsory." "Free education" implies that no child should be required to pay any fees, charges, or costs that might prevent him or her from enrolling in and finishing elementary education, unless the child has been admitted to a school that is not funded by the relevant government by his or her parents. All youngsters in the 6-14 age range are required by 'compulsory education' to enrol in, attend, and finish primary school, which is the responsibility of the relevant government and local authorities to provide and guarantee. In accordance with the provisions of the RTE

Act, India has made progress toward a rights-based framework that imposes a legal obligation on the Central and State Governments to implement this fundamental child right as enshrined in the Article 21A of the Constitution.

2. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA): The goal of the SSA is to offer free and obligatory education to every kid between the ages of six and fourteen. The total number of students enrolled in elementary schools has increased from 18.79 crores in 2009–2010 to 19.67 crores in 2015–2016 during the implementation of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. According to UDISE 2015–16, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) is 99.21% for primary level and 92.81% for upper primary level. According to the RTE norm, the Pupil Teacher Ratio (PTR) has increased from 32 in 2009–10 to 25 in 2015–16. The PTR in India's government schools is currently at 62.65%, with an average of 30:1 at the primary level and 35:1 at the upper primary level. The number of youngsters who were not enrolled in school was 134.6 lakh in 2005, which has since decreased to 81 lakh in 2009 and 60.64 lakh in 2015. According to UDISE, 2015–16, the average annual dropout rate at the primary level has decreased from 6.76% in 2009–10 to 4.13% in 2014–15, while the average annual dropout rate at the upper primary level is 4.03% in 2014–15. According to UDISE 2015–16, the transition rate from primary to upper primary has increased from 85.17% in 2009–10 to 90.14% in 2014–15. In 2014–15, the Gender Parity Index (GPI) was 0.93 at the primary level and 0.95 at the upper primary level. The proportion of SC children enrolled at the elementary level has increased from 19.06% in 2010–11 to 19.79% in 2015–16. At the elementary level, the enrollment rate for ST children is 10.35% in 2015–16. The percentage of Muslim children enrolled at the elementary level has increased from 12.50% in 2010–11 to 13.80% in 2015–16. According to UDISE 2015–16, India has a total of 1,62,237 primary schools and 78,903 upper primary schools that were established between 2002–03 and 2015–16, as well as 10,76,994 government schools that are still functioning (Ministry of Education, 2018).

3. Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA): By offering resources, infrastructure, and teacher training, RMSA aims to raise the enrolment rate in secondary schools and improve the quality of education.

3. Mid-Day Meal Scheme: This program seeks to enhance students' nutrition and school attendance by offering free midday meals in government schools. By providing free midday meals in government schools, this initiative aims to improve students' nutrition and school attendance. For the years 2021–22 through 2025–26, the Government approved the centrally sponsored Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirman (PM POSHAN) Scheme, formerly known as the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, in September 2021, to provide one hot cooked meal in Government and Government-assisted schools, Special Training Centers (STC), Madarsas, and Maqtabs supported by the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). The plan, according to data from 2021–22, covers around 11.80 million children attending 11.20 million schools throughout the nation. The Government has allocated a budget of Rs. 12,467.39 crore (about US\$ 1.5 billion) to the scheme (IBEF) in the interim budget for 2024–25. The main goals of the PM POSHAN Scheme are to address two of the most pressing issues facing the majority of Indian children—hunger and education—by:

- Enhancing the nutritional health of eligible children in government-funded and government-aided schools.
- Motivating underprivileged youngsters from marginalized groups to attend school on a more consistent basis and helping them focus in the classroom.
- Supplying dietary assistance to youngsters in primary school who live in regions impacted by drought or disaster during the summer.

2. Affordable and high-quality technical, vocational, and tertiary education, including university, is the aim of Targets 4.3 and 4.4. Raise the proportion of young people and adults with relevant skills.

1. National Skill Development Mission (NSDM): The goal of the NSDM is to give young people the skills they need to find work by offering vocational training and skill development possibilities. The mission seeks to establish a comprehensive framework for skill development that includes chances for continuous education. This includes integrating skills into the school curriculum, offering high-quality skill training opportunities in the short and long term, as well as ensuring career advancement that aligns with the goals of the students through productive job creation.

By establishing a framework for outcome-focused training, align trainees' goals for long-term livelihoods with employer/industry demand and workforce productivity.

By establishing a solid quality assurance framework for skilling that is applicable to all Ministries, States, and private training providers, we can establish and implement cross-sectoral, nationally and internationally acceptable standards for skill training in the nation.

Establish opportunities for skill development in key unorganized industries, such as the building industry, where there are few options for skill training, and give ways for workers in these identified industries to re-skill and up-skill in order to facilitate their transition into formal sector jobs.

Guarantee that there are enough choices for long-term skilling of a high standard, benchmarked to internationally recognized qualification criteria, that will eventually lead to the development of a highly skilled workforce .

2. **Community Colleges:** Community colleges have been established to provide skill- and vocational-based education at a reasonable price. Among the programs included are the Skill India Mission and Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY).

3. **Polytechnic and ITIs:** Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) and Polytechnic colleges provide technical and vocational programs at the post-secondary level. These institutions work with nearby industries to offer hands-on training. These institutions concentrate on skill development and prepare students for a variety of technical professions.

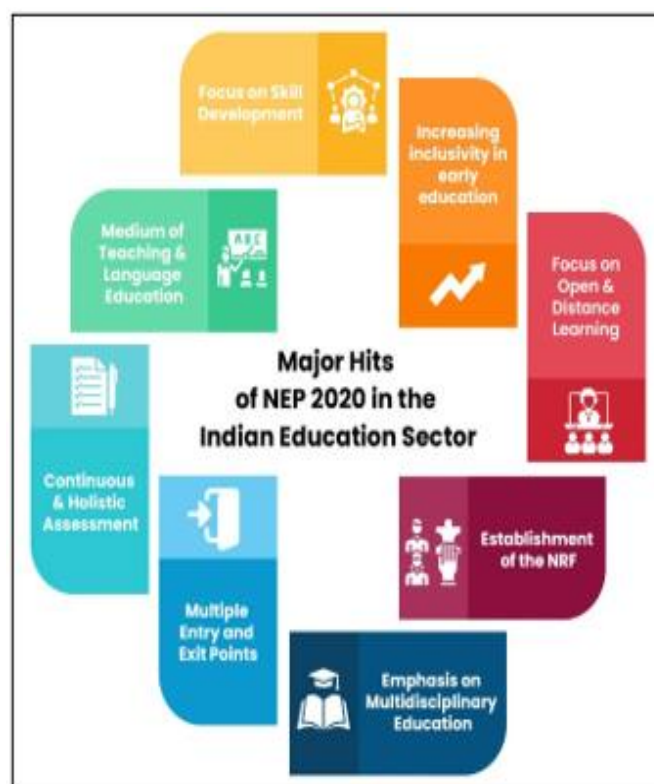
3. **Target 4. 5: Eradicate gender disparities in education and provide vulnerable groups (such as those with disabilities) with access to all educational levels.**

1. **Gender Sensitization:** Gender sensitization programs have been implemented in schools and communities to raise awareness about the significance of gender equality in education.

2. **Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (BBBP):** The BBBP initiative, which focuses on gender equality and female empowerment, also promotes girls' education as a means of empowering women and ensuring their participation in society. The program was established following the publication of the national census data for 2011, which showed a decline in crucial gender indicators, namely Child Sex Ratio (CSR) and Sex Ratio at Birth (SRB). The ratio of girls to boys between the ages of 0 and 6 is used to define CSR. The ratio gradually fell, from 945 in 1999 to 927 in 2001, and then to 918 girls for every 1,000 boys in 2011. A thorough examination of the decline revealed that the main contributing factor was SRB. A dip in these ratios is a strong sign of gender discrimination and female disempowerment since it reflects both pre-birth discrimination through gender-biased, sex selective abortion and post-birth discrimination by ignoring the girl child's needs for health, food, and education. The problem was found to be caused by the strong societal, cultural, and religious preference for boys, according to research, which led to the introduction of the BBBP program.

4. Target 4. 6 and 4. 7: Make sure that all young people and a significant proportion of adults are literate and numerate. Make sure that every student has the knowledge and skills necessary to support sustainable development.

1. National Education Policy (NEP) 2020: The NEP 2020 is a comprehensive reform of the Indian education system that aims to transform it. It emphasizes holistic development, a flexible curriculum, the integration of technology, and increased funding for education.



(Source: UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report 2025)

2. Digital India Initiative: The Digital India campaign aims to improve digital literacy and access to information and communication technology (ICT) in schools and rural areas. This initiative aims to improve the quality of education through technology.

Inclusive Education:

The aim of SDG to make education system vibrant, energetic and high-spirited by extirpate all types of barriers. It mandates essential knowledge, adaptable skills, positive learning environment, empowerment of teachers and students and so on. The RTE Act, 2009 of India guarantees for inclusive education by merging all marginalized groups. It made education free and compulsory to foster a positive learning environment. It also reserves one-fourth of the seats in private schools for children from Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) of the society, thereby bringing children from marginalized sections like Schedule Tribes, migrants and disabled into the mainstream (Pandey, 2018). As per the ASER report 2024 overall school enrolment rates among the 6-14 age group have exceeded 95% for close to 20 years. This proportion has stayed almost the same, from 98.4% in 2022 to 98.1% in 2024. Across all states, enrolment in this age group is above 95% in 2024. To increase adult literacy in the country, the government runs a national scheme called Saakshar Bharat Programme (SBP) (earlier called National Literacy Mission). More than 19 million adults (age group 15 and above) benefitted from this programme in the year 2016-17 (GOI, 2018, p. 7). To make education inclusive for differently-abled children (or children with special needs), India ratified the UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2007 and also passed a landmark legislation called 'Rights of Persons with Disability Act, 2016' (RPD Act) (Jindal, 2016). As per Census report, 2.2% of the Indian population is disabled out of which about 45% is illiterate (GOI, 2011), which roughly translates to more than 13 million people. Government of India aims to make education inclusive for them through specific components like Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS) and Alternative and Innovative Education (AIE) under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (Singal, 2009).

III. Conclusion and Suggestions:

From the above discussion the study concluded that sustainable development become reality when the country will provide inclusive education. A high-quality education has a significant impact on human dignity and a decent life. The 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda's fourth aim is to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to seek and finish a quality education that will prepare them for employment and personal satisfaction. The SDG 4 proposes equal and inclusive education for all that is closely linked to the effective implementation and inclusive societies and most relevantly, on building effective and accountable institutions at all levels. SDG 4 advocates to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' ; thus keeps the target that by 2030 all boys and girls to complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning-outcomes ; also to ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development through education for sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, global citizenship and promoting a culture of peace and brotherhood. However, within the educational community the focus has been shifted from access to equitable quality education to lifelong learning, strengthened training and 21st century skills for work and life and improved learning outcomes at all levels of education.

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