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The Role Of Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan In Achieving Sustainable Development Goals In Punjab With Respect To Enrolment Growth By Gender And Caste

Daljit Singh, Dr. Raminder Singh
Ph.D. Scholar, Head and Professor
Department of Education and Community Services
Punjabi University, Patiala (India)

Abstract: Realizing the importance of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for human well-being and recognizing the role of education in achieving these goals, this research paper examines the role of the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) in promoting educational equity. RMSA is a Government of India initiative launched in 2009 to enhance access and improve the quality of secondary education. The study evaluates the increase in enrolment among girls, Scheduled Castes (SC), and Other Backward Classes (OBC) students at the secondary and higher secondary levels in Punjab during the implementation period of the RMSA. Due to the high validity of U-DISE (Unified District Information System for Education) data, enrolment growth has been estimated using percentage analysis of statistical data derived from this source. The findings of this study indicate that during the RMSA period in Punjab, there was a notable increase in Gross Enrolment Ratios (GERs) and a reduction in transition gaps between secondary and higher secondary levels. Enrolment also rose among gender-based categories and socially disadvantaged groups, including SC and OBC students, at both educational levels. However, the enrolment growth among girls lagged behind that of boys, highlighting persistent gender disparities. Additionally, a significant proportion of students do not transition to higher secondary education after completing secondary schooling, with dropout rates of approximately 25% for boys and 23% for girls. The situation is more severe among Scheduled Caste (SC) students, where the dropout rate reaches nearly 30%. While RMSA played a key role to the achievement of the SDGs by increasing enrolment among disadvantaged groups, it was not entirely successful to sustain gains in the Gross Enrolment Ratio and was not fully effective in ensuring the retention of all students within the education system.

Keywords: Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan, Sustainable Development Goals, enrolment growth, gender disparity, Scheduled Castes, Other Backward Classes, Punjab.

1. Introduction

Following the partial success of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, which was launched by the Government of India to achieve the universalization of elementary education, there was a significant increase in the demand for secondary education. In response, the government initiated the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) in 2009 as a targeted program to universalize secondary education. Between 2009 and its merger into the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan in 2018, RMSA implemented numerous multifaceted and multidirectional efforts to expand and improve both access and quality in secondary education.

This period also coincided with global efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs strive to create a better and more sustainable future for all by addressing global challenges such as poverty, inequality, environmental degradation, and conflict (United Nations, 2015). Education plays a pivotal role in the achievement of the SDGs by reducing inequalities, promoting quality education, and fostering economic growth. It empowers individuals-particularly those from marginalized groups-and promotes gender equality, thus contributing significantly to sustainable development (UNESCO, 2016).

Educational programs such as the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) significantly contributed to the pursuit of the SDGs by advancing quality education and equity. The program focused on marginalized groups, including girls, Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs), aiming to ensure equal opportunities and reduce educational disparities (Government of India, 2009). By addressing barriers related to gender, caste, and socio-economic background, RMSA played a crucial role in fostering inclusive education. Its efforts aligned with SDG 4 (inclusive and equitable quality education for all), SDG 5 (gender equality and empowerment), and SDG 10 (reduction of inequalities). Thus, RMSA represents a strategic initiative aimed at advancing sustainable development through educational reforms that promote both gender equality and social inclusion.

Findings from various studies indicate that RMSA has made a significant contribution to improving the secondary education landscape in India. The GEM (Global Education Monitoring) Report 2020 titled *"Inclusion and Education: All Means All"* also highlights India's Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) as a strong example of national commitment toward expanding access to secondary education, with a particular focus on inclusion of disadvantaged groups. Key initiatives under RMSA included the construction of new secondary and higher secondary schools, the upgrading of essential facilities, and the provision of free textbooks and scholarships. The impact of RMSA was clearly visible across different states, where it not only improved academic outcomes but also facilitated greater participation in secondary education (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020). RMSA played a crucial role in enhancing access to education, particularly in rural and underprivileged areas (NUEPA, 2017). Reports from the Ministry of Education highlighted substantial improvements in enrolment rates, especially for girls. Furthermore, according to Sudarshan (2019), RMSA played a vital role in reducing dropout rates through scholarship programs and targeted interventions. By addressing gender disparities and improving academic performance in educationally backward regions, RMSA promoted greater educational equity (NUEPA, 2017; Sudarshan, 2019). Moreover, the provision of free textbooks, scholarships, and transportation facilities under RMSA contributed to higher retention rates in secondary schools in these regions (Rathore & Gupta, 2016). RMSA significantly improved educational access in rural areas by focusing on infrastructure development and increasing student attendance, particularly among girls (Singh & Kumar, 2018). The initiatives also emphasized the development of basic infrastructure, including the construction of new schools and sanitation facilities, which played a pivotal role in boosting the enrolment of girls in educationally backward regions (Batra, 2020). These studies highlight RMSA's contributions to improving infrastructure, promoting gender equality, and enhancing student retention, especially in the context of rural and marginalized communities.

However, some studies indicate that key indicators of progress in secondary education—such as access, quality, and equity—did not consistently show significant improvements attributable to RMSA. For instance, RMSA had limited impact on overcoming barriers to school access for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as SCs, STs, OBCs, and girls (Chand & Bala, 2018). A report by the Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability (2016) highlighted a decline in transition rates from secondary to higher secondary education for SC, ST, and Muslim girls in states such as Bihar and Himachal Pradesh.

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that education plays an important role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, and educational programs like RMSA have the potential to make a significant contribution in this regard. However, empirical evidence suggests that while RMSA made notable strides, its outcomes fell short of expectations in certain areas. The current study seeks to critically assess the contribution of RMSA to sustainable development in the context of Punjab.

2. Rationale of Study

A key objective of the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) was to advance the universalization of quality secondary education, with a particular emphasis on equitable access for students from socially and economically disadvantaged groups. The goals and strategies of RMSA were closely aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), Goal 5 (Gender Equality and Empowerment), and Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities), underscoring India's commitment to inclusive and equitable education for all. In this way, RMSA played a significant role in contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

In light of the above, the current research paper studies the role of the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan in improving enrolment rates by increasing access to secondary and higher secondary education for girls and marginalized groups (Scheduled Castes and other backward classes). The findings of this study will provide insights into the role of the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by increasing enrolment rates among girls, Scheduled Castes, and Other Backward Classes in Punjab.

3. Methodology

An analysis of the increase and improvement in enrolment at the secondary and higher secondary levels in Punjab has been conducted in the context of gender and caste. For this purpose, the U-DISE data has been primarily used. It was planned in 2009 to extend the U-DISE information management system upto secondary education. By the 2012-13 session, it was fully implemented and became the most reliable source for secondary education-related data. These valid secondary data have been used to reach accurate conclusions through data analysis. Some additional data was also obtained from other sources. To assess progress in enrolment through Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), available data from 2006–07 (pre-RMSA implementation) to 2017–18 has been analyzed. After presenting the obtained quantitative data in session-wise organized tables, the data was categorized according to the background variables and also represented through line graphs. To estimate the increase/decrease or stability in enrolment, percentage analysis was conducted, and comparative and proportional analysis was also used where necessary.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Study of Enrolment Growth in terms of GER

The data presented in Table 1 and Figure 1 illustrate the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER%) for Punjab at both secondary and senior secondary education levels from 2006–07 to 2017–18. To analyze enrolment growth over this period, the data have been categorized into two segments: the pre-Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) period (2006–07 to 2009–10) and the post-RMSA period (2010–11 to 2017–18). This division facilitates an assessment of RMSA's impact on educational access and progression. During the pre-RMSA phase, the average GER was approximately 51.55% at the secondary level and 35.10% at

Table 1

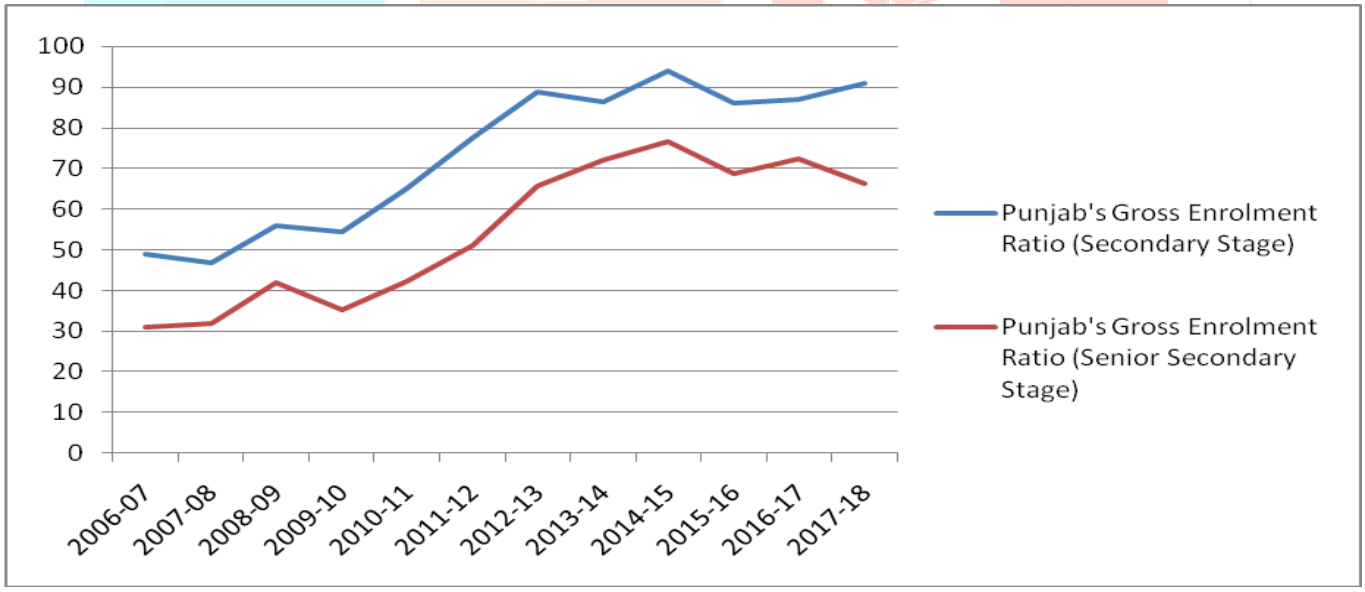
Punjab's Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER%) for Secondary and Senior Secondary Education from 2006-07 to 2017-18

Year	Punjab's Gross Enrolment Ratio (Secondary Stage)	Punjab's Gross Enrolment Ratio (Senior Secondary Stage)
2006-07	48.95	31.06
2007-08	46.95	32.04
2008-09	55.9	41.9
2009-10	54.4	35.4
2010-11	65.2	42.2
2011-12	77.4	50.9
2012-13	88.8	65.48
2013-14	86.39	71.79
2014-15	93.91	76.46
2015-16	85.96	68.67
2016-17	87.08	72.24
2017-18	90.88	66.13

Source. Adapted from Ministry of Human Resource Development, GoI; Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No. 2771, dated 30.07.14. and Unified District Information System for Education (*U-DISE)* http://udise.in/

Figure 1

Punjab's Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER%) for Secondary and Senior Secondary Education from 2006-07 to 2017-18



the senior secondary level. Following the implementation of RMSA, these ratios increased substantially, with secondary GER reaching a peak of 93.91% and senior secondary GER peaking at 76.46% in 2014–15. This reflects a growth of 42.36% in secondary and 41.36% in senior secondary GER, signifying a considerable expansion in access to schooling. The transition between educational stages also improved, evidenced by a narrowing gap between the two levels to 17.45% in 2014-15. This progression aligns with RMSA's objective of enhancing retention and facilitating smooth transitions across educational levels. However, in the subsequent years, the GER at both levels exhibited fluctuations. By 2017-18, senior secondary GER had declined to 66.13%, and the gap with secondary GER widened again to 24.75%, indicating areas where challenges persisted. Overall, the data suggest that RMSA was largely effective in expanding secondary education, though further policy interventions may be necessary to ensure the universalisation of senior secondary education in Punjab.

4.2 Study of Enrolment Growth by Gender

Based on the data presented in Table 2 and Figure 2, the analysis indicates that during the implementation of the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan, enrolment at the secondary level in Punjab increased each year, while enrolment at the higher secondary level fluctuated.. Overall, from 2012-13 to 2017-18, there was a 4.28% increase in enrolment at the secondary level and a 4.20% increase at the higher secondary level. Although the increase in enrolment was a positive sign, the significant gap in the number of students enrolled at the secondary and higher secondary levels, which ranged between approximately 1.75 lakh to 2.15 lakh students every year, highlighted a large gap in student transition rates from secondary to higher secondary levels.

Table 2

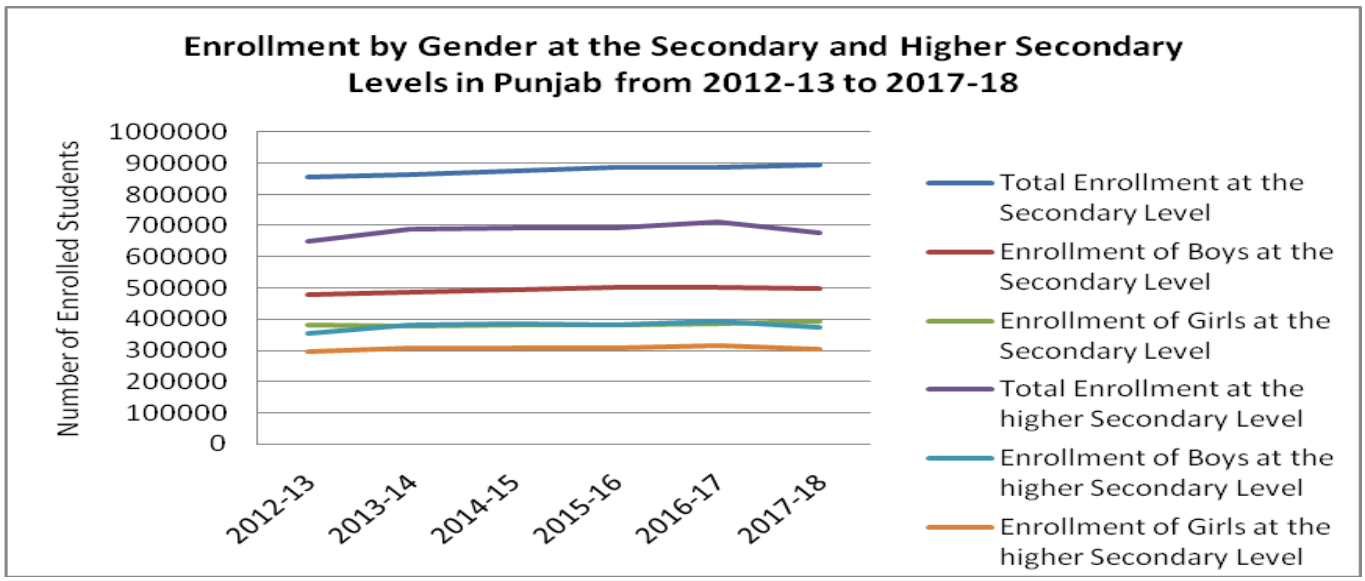
Enrolment by Gender at the Secondary and Higher Secondary Levels in Punjab from 2012-13 to 2017-18

Year	Enrolment at the Secondary Level					Enrolment at the Higher Secondary Level				
	Total	Boys		Girls		Total	Boys		Girls	
		Count	%	Count	%		Count	%	Count	%
2012-13	857762	477866	55.71	379896	44.29	651236	355342	54.564	295894	45.44
2013-14	863846	486493	56.32	377353	43.68	689781	380929	55.22	308852	44.78
2014-15	877446	495198	56.44	382248	43.56	694474	384984	55.44	309490	44.56
2015-16	887442	503843	56.77	383599	43.23	691518	382950	55.38	308568	44.62
2016-17	887703	502658	56.62	385045	43.38	711683	394409	55.42	317274	44.58
2017-18	894522	499464	55.84	394920	44.15	678594	374396	55.17	304336	44.85

Source: Unified District Information System for Education (*U-DISE)* http://udise.

Figure 2

Enrolment by Gender at the Secondary and Higher Secondary Levels in Punjab from 2012-13 to 2017-18



After studying enrolment by gender, the results showed that from 2012-13 to 2017-18, the number of boys and girls at the secondary level increased, with an annual increase of 4.51% for boys and 3.95% for

girls. While there was an increase in the number of students in both gender categories, the percentage increase for girls was lower compared to that of boys. In the year 2012-13, the difference in enrolment between boys (55.71%) and girls (44.29%) was approximately 11%, and this percentage gap slightly increased in the following years (up to 2017-18). Compared to 2012-13, in 2017-18, 5.36% more boys and 2.85% more girls were enrolled in higher secondary education. Thus, even at the higher secondary level, the increase in enrolment was higher for boys than for girls. In percentage terms, in the year 2012-13, 54.56% of the total students receiving education at the higher secondary level were boys, and 45.44% were girls. Thus, girls were approximately 9% fewer than boys. In the following year (2013-14), this gap increased further to over 10%, and by the year 2017-18, the gap remained above 10%. However, this number roughly matches the population percentage of women (44.28%) and men (55.72%) in Punjab's 15-19 age group according to the 2011 Census data.

After analysis, it can be concluded that during this period, enrolment increased at both the secondary and higher secondary levels. However, the increase in the number of girls was lower than that of boys. In 2012-13, the number of girls enrolled at the secondary level was 11.42% lower than that of boys, while at the higher secondary level, it was 9.12% lower. Although this gap fluctuated in the following years, it ultimately widened compared to 2012-13.

4.3 Study of Enrolment Growth by Caste

Table 3

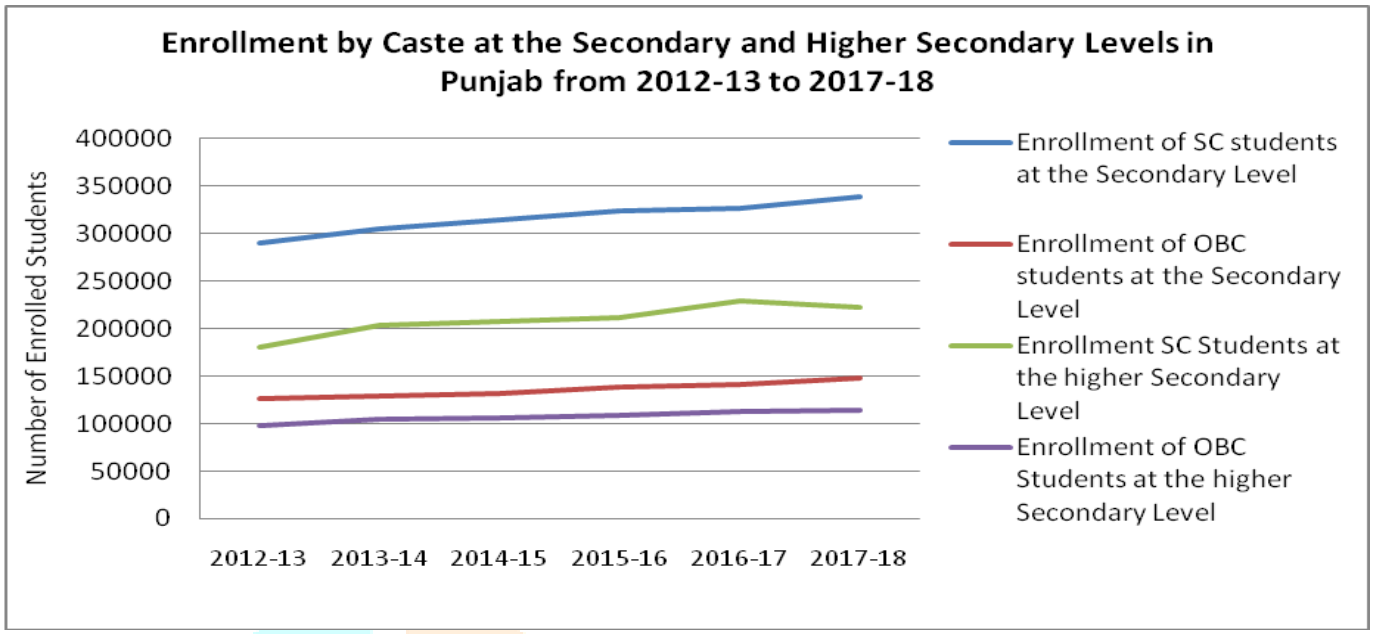
Enrolment by Caste at the Secondary and Higher Secondary Levels in Punjab from 2012-13 to 2017-18

Year	Enrolment at Secondary Level				Enrolment at Higher Secondary Level			
	SC Students		OBC Students		SC Students		OBC Students	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
2012-13	290009	33.81	126177	14.71	180653	27.74	97946	15.04
2013-14	305406	35.35	128552	14.88	204061	29.58	104876	15.20
2014-15	314689	35.86	130973	14.93	207609	29.89	106158	15.29
2015-16	324542	36.57	137861	15.53	211991	30.66	108976	15.76
2016-17	327049	36.84	140495	15.83	229165	32.20	113833	15.99
2017-18	338793	37.87	147563	16.50	221795	32.68	114697	16.90

Source: Unified District Information System for Education (*U-DISE)* http://udise.in/

Figure 3

Enrolment by Caste at the Secondary and Higher Secondary Levels in Punjab from 2012-13 to 2017-18



The data presented in Table 3 and Figure 3 show that in 2012-13, 290,009 Scheduled Caste (SC) students (33.81% of the total students) were receiving secondary education. In the following years, the enrolment of Scheduled Caste students consistently increased, and by the year 2017-18, the number of Scheduled Caste students receiving secondary education rose to 338,793, reflecting an increase of 16.82%.

As a result of this increase, the enrolment situation changed in such a way that while in 2012-13, Scheduled Caste students constituted 33.81% of the total students, by 2017-18, their share increased to 33.87% of the total enrolled students. In 2012-13, 126,177 students from Other Backward Classes (OBC) (14.71% of the total students) were receiving secondary education. In the following years, the enrolment of OBC students continued to rise, and by 2017-18, the number of OBC students increased to 147,563, reflecting a 16.94% increase. As a result of this increase, the percentage share of OBC students in total enrolment also grew, from 14.71% to 16.50%. Data on caste-based enrolment at the higher secondary level show that in 2012-13, 180,653 Scheduled Caste students (27.74% of the total students) were receiving higher secondary education.

In the following years, the enrolment of Scheduled Caste students continued to increase, and by 2017-18, this number had risen to 221,795 (a significant increase of 22.77%). As a result of this increase, by 2017-18, Scheduled Caste students accounted for 32.68% of total enrolment at the higher secondary level. Although there was a significant rise in the percentage share of Scheduled Caste students in higher secondary enrolment, the number of students pursuing higher secondary education was still much lower compared to those at the secondary level. This highlights a significant gap in the transition rate of Scheduled Caste students from secondary to higher secondary education.

An analysis of the enrolment data of Other Backward Classes (OBC) students at the higher secondary level showed that in 2012-13, 97,946 students (15.04% of the total students) were receiving higher secondary education. Over the following years, this number continued to increase, and by 2017-18, it had risen to 114,697 (16.90% of the total students), reflecting a 17.10% increase. The data analysis also revealed that, in all years, the number of OBC students pursuing higher secondary education was still lower compared to those at the secondary level. This indicates that not all students who received secondary education continued their studies at the higher secondary level. While this gap was about 18-22% for OBC students, for Scheduled Caste students, it was even greater, exceeding 30%. In other words, nearly one-third of the Scheduled Caste students who completed secondary education did not enroll in higher secondary education."

5. Conclusion

The data from 2006–07 to 2017–18 show a significant rise in Punjab's Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) at both secondary and higher secondary levels following the implementation of RMSA in 2009. GERs (93.91% for secondary and 74.46% for higher secondary) peaked in 2014–15, indicating improved access and smoother transitions between levels. However, subsequent fluctuations and a decline in higher secondary GER (66.13%) by 2017–18 highlight ongoing challenges. The number of students from both gender-based categories receiving secondary and higher secondary education in the state of Punjab was approximately in line, in percentage terms, with the population percentage of the 15–19 age group (as per Census data of 2011). During the period under study, there was an increase in enrolment of both categories; however, the increase in the number of girls was lower compared to that of boys. As a result, the gap between the number of boys and girls in secondary and higher secondary education widened from 2012–13 to 2017–18. The transition rate of boys from secondary to higher secondary level was lower compared to that of girls. Consequently, the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan in Punjab was not able to achieve the desired success in connecting girls with secondary and higher secondary education. In the year 2012-13, Scheduled Caste (SC) students in Punjab constituted 33.81% of the total students receiving secondary education. Over the years, there was a continuous increase in their enrolment, and by the year 2017-18, their share had risen to 33.87%. During the same period, the enrolment of students from other backward categories also increased, from 14.71% to 16.49%.

As for the higher secondary classes, the increase in SC students' enrolment resulted in their proportion rising to 32.68% in 2017-18, compared to 27.74% in 2012-13. For students from other backward categories, the proportion increased from 15.04% in 2012-13 to 16.90% in 2017-18. Although the percentage of Scheduled Caste (SC) students enrolling in secondary and higher secondary education saw a notable rise, their overall participation at the higher secondary level remained significantly lower than at the secondary level. The enrolment gap for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) ranged between 18% and 22%, whereas for SC students, it exceeded 30%. Additionally, nearly a quarter of boys (25%) and girls (23%) from these categories dropped out of school.

In conclusion, while the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) significantly enhanced access to and progression in secondary and senior secondary education in Punjab—evident through increased Gross Enrolment Ratios (GERs) and reduced transition gaps—it also played a crucial role in improving enrolment among marginalized groups. Thus RMSA contributed toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in education, but it fell short of fully ensuring student retention at the higher secondary level, underscoring the need for sustained policy intervention to achieve universalisation.

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