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At the Heart of Democracy: Grama Panchayat Libraries in Karnataka

Myths of Competency-Based Assessment

Funding Teaching Adequately

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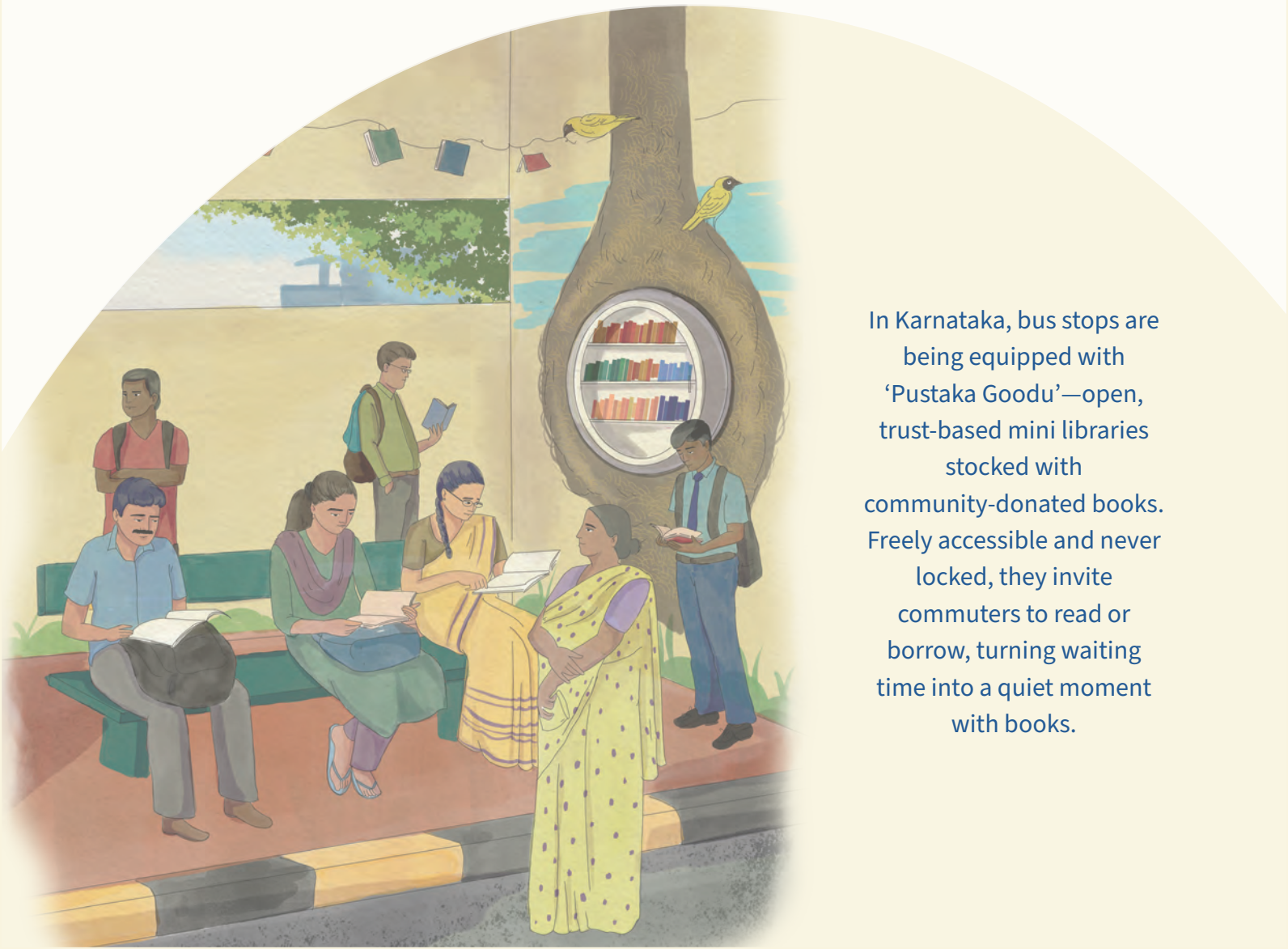

In Karnataka, bus stops are being equipped with ‘Pustaka Goodu’—open, trust-based mini libraries stocked with community-donated books. Freely accessible and never locked, they invite commuters to read or borrow, turning waiting time into a quiet moment with books.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Despite steady rises in enrolment driven by the expansion of schools even into remote areas, along with policies such as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 setting out an ambitious vision for learning, India's education system continues to struggle with systemic issues. The quality of teaching, gaps in foundational learning, lack of infrastructure, and teacher shortages remain persistent concerns, often leading to irregular attendance and early dropouts.

This is also visible in how families navigate the education system. In this issue, we examine data from the National Sample Survey (2022–23), which reveals a striking gap in household spending between private unaided and government schools. The findings also highlight how concerns about affordability, which are often overlooked, significantly shape educational choices and access.

India currently has over one lakh single-teacher schools, many of them the result of earlier policies that prioritised bringing schools closer to habitations. These efforts helped expand enrolment and literacy, especially among women. One article in this issue argues that while small schools present administrative challenges, closure is not the only option. Academic clustering, structured teacher sharing, and greater recognition of multi-grade teaching offer ways to strengthen instruction without weakening neighbourhood schooling.

Three articles show how improvements in classroom practice can emerge within existing public systems. The Bal Shodh Mela experience from Uttarakhand and Chattisgarh shows how inquiry-based learning rooted in local contexts can become part of everyday teaching. The NIPUN Shikshak programme in Madhya Pradesh illustrates how cluster-level discussions and demonstration classes can support teachers and improve student learning. A third article examines competency-based assessment, arguing that the competencies articulated in NCF-SE 2023 call for a deeper shift in pedagogy that must begin well before the secondary stage.

Grama panchayat libraries, and community libraries more broadly, seldom receive the attention they deserve. Yet in many villages in Karnataka, they remain among the few public spaces where children can access books beyond their school textbooks. When active, accessible, and stocked with relevant children's books, they allow children to read widely and encounter diverse materials from picture books to stories that invite discussion, reflection, writing, and drawing. They also provide safe spaces where children see others reading and studying, a shared environment that can help shape reading habits, especially for children from homes where no one reads. At a time when strengthening foundational learning remains a persistent challenge, libraries can expand opportunities for children to read and learn beyond the classroom.

Underlying these discussions is the question of public investment. India's education spending remains around 3–3.5 percent of GDP, well below the long-standing target of 6 percent. As highlighted in this issue, the consequences are visible in the teaching workforce, where shortages, contractual appointments, and uneven deployment continue to shape classroom realities.

Taken together, the contributions in this issue suggest that strengthening public education depends less on creating entirely new systems and more on sustained attention to the everyday conditions that make learning possible—such as accessible schools, supported teachers, and public institutions that communities trust.

Varun Nallur

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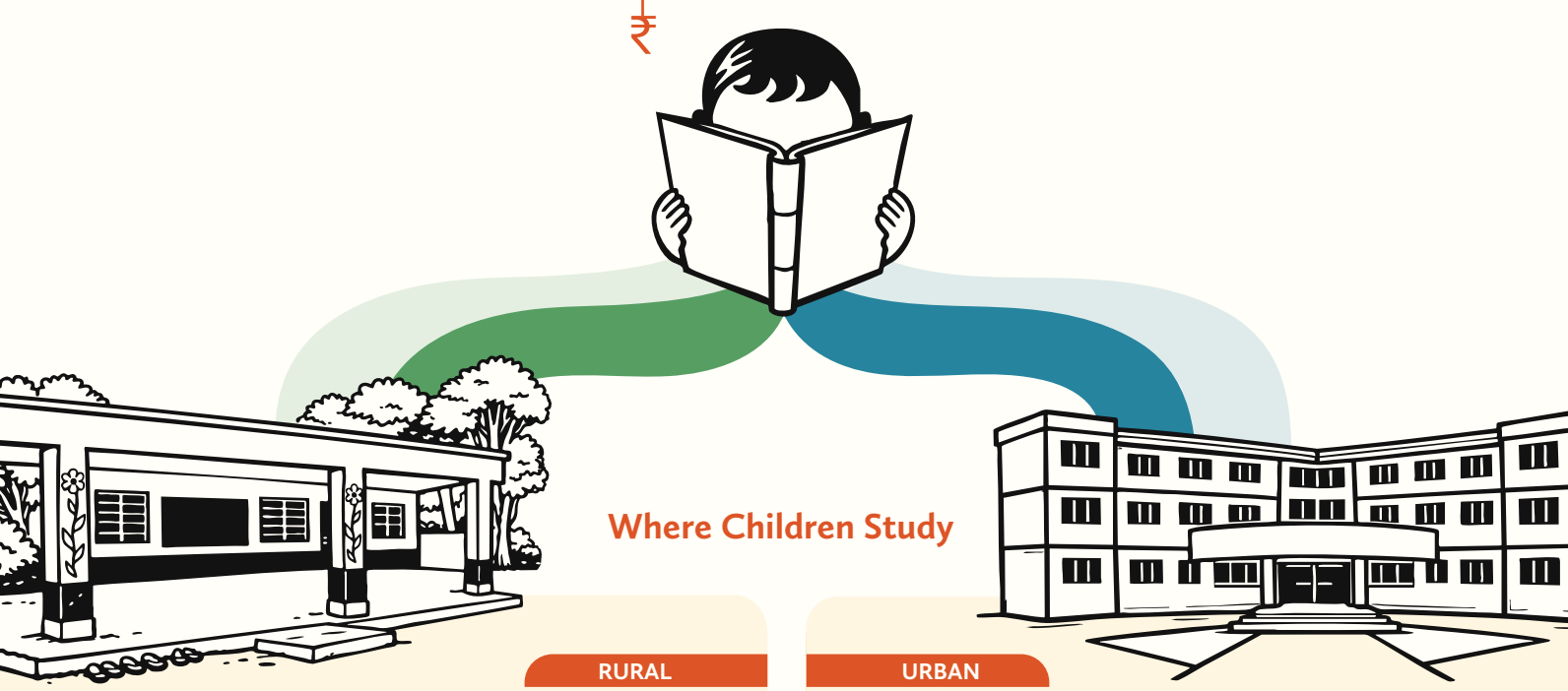
The Cost of Learning

Insights from the NSS Consumption Expenditure Survey, 2022–23 (80th Round)

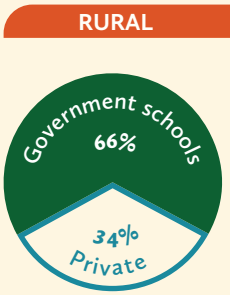
While access has expanded over the years, the everyday expenses of schooling continue to rise, especially beyond the elementary stage. These costs are unevenly distributed across households, school types, and gender, with important consequences for who remains enrolled.

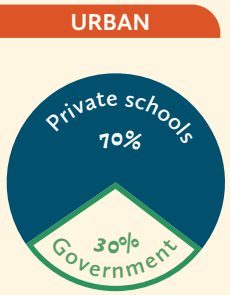
Using data from the *NSS 80th Round Comprehensive Modular Survey on education*, this infographic looks at household spending on schooling and highlights where affordability has become a key constraint.



Where Children Study

Rural India still relies heavily on government schools.

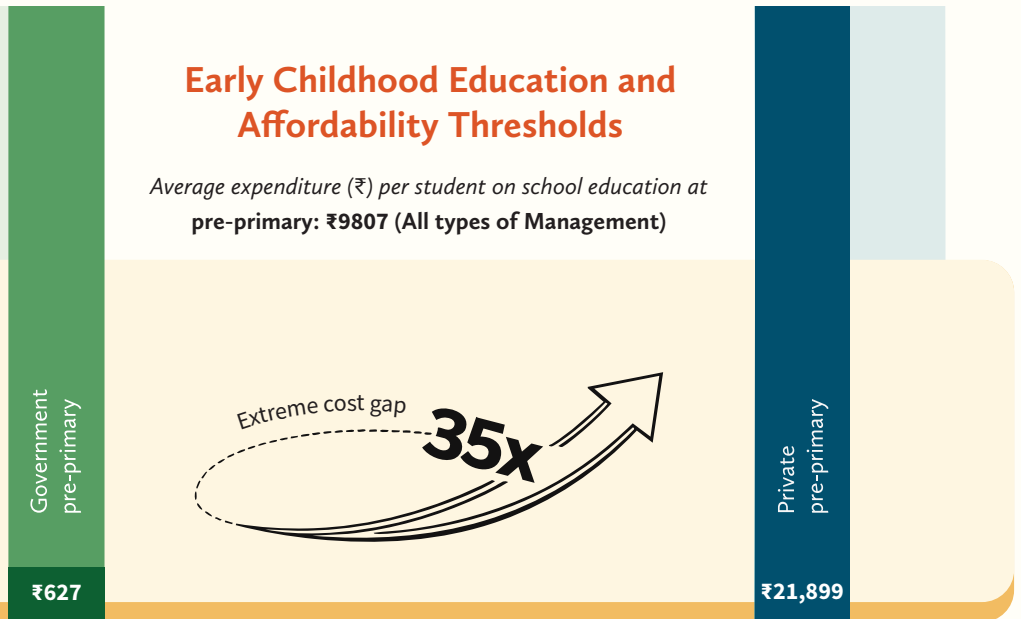




Early Childhood Education and Affordability Thresholds

Average expenditure (₹) per student on school education at **pre-primary: ₹9807 (All types of Management)**

Household spending in **Government pre-primary** remains very low, at this foundational stage. Public provision for pre-primary remains the most accessible option. The priority now is ensuring quality keeps pace with access.



Spending by School Stage

Stage	Govt	Pvt Aided	Pvt Unaided
Pre-primary	₹627	₹1393	₹21899
Primary	₹1818	₹13847	₹24633
Middle	₹2682	₹14873	₹30869
Secondary	**₹4581**	**₹14242**	**₹35426**
Higher Secondary	**₹7293**	**₹21017**	**₹40601**

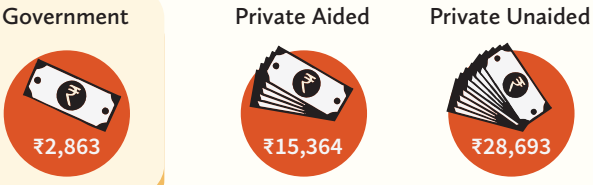
Household expenditure spikes sharply at Secondary and Higher Secondary.

These are also the stages where dropout rates peak in UDISE+ data, particularly among girls, as rising schooling costs and other factors add pressure on households.

How much Households Spend

Average annual household expenditure per student (All India)

Is **FREE schooling** in Govenment schools actually FREE?

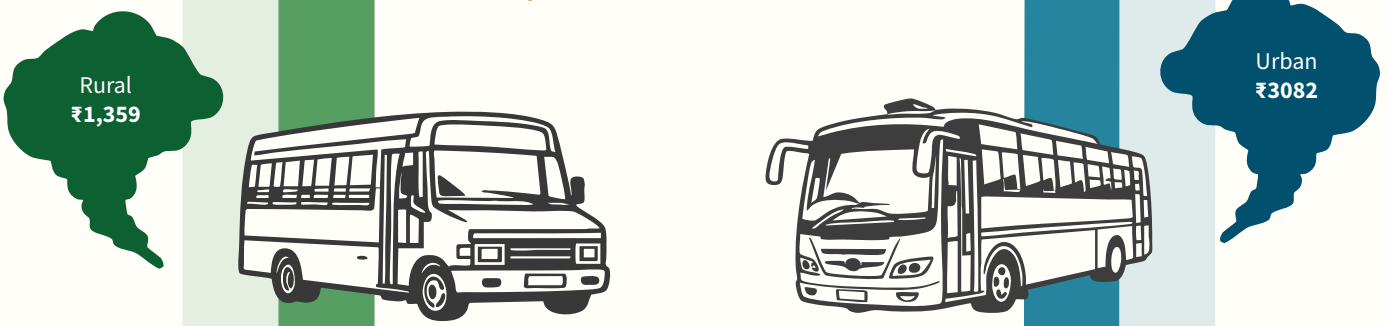


The cost gap between school types is stark: households spend nearly **ten times more** on private unaided schools than on government schools.

Even in government schools, non-fee costs account for a share of household spending. Even small costs can increase the risk of dropout for children from poorer households.

Distribution of costs (All India, per student – All types of management)

Transport as a Silent Cost Driver



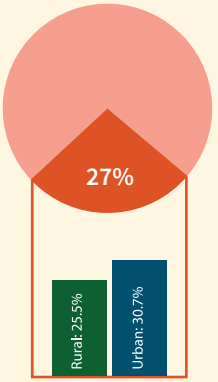
Transport is now the **2nd** highest non-fee education expense

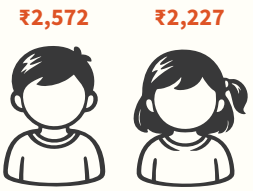
The Expansion of Private Coaching

Coaching is widespread and is no longer an elite phenomenon:

27% of students nationwide use private coaching **(Rural:25.5%; Urban:30.7%)**, rising to 38% at the secondary level.

In urban government schools, coaching use reaches 40%, often higher than in private schools.

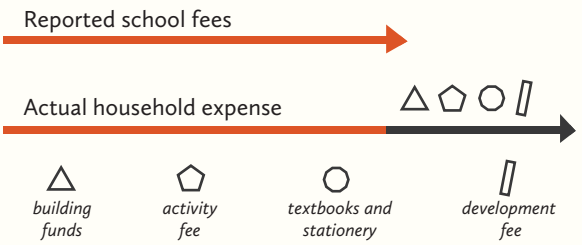




Families spend an average of ₹2,409 per child on coaching (Male: ₹2,572; Female: ₹2,227), in addition to school expenses.

Coaching fills perceived gaps in classroom learning, adding financial burden for families and widening inequality through unequal spending. Strengthening in school instruction, teacher support, and academic remediation can reduce reliance on private coaching.

Hidden Costs To Watch Out For



Rural households spend **₹1,664** per child annually on textbooks and stationery.

In India, affordability now plays a role in determining who stays in school, particularly after the elementary years. As children move into secondary and higher secondary grades, education becomes steadily more expensive despite efforts by governments to keep costs low. This is also where dropouts peak, especially for girls. Many children are leaving school because the households they come from can no longer afford to keep them enrolled. Targeted support such as scholarships, transport assistance, and coverage of exam related costs can help correct these everyday inequalities.

Policy must focus less on scattered relief schemes and more on lowering the everyday cost of schooling through free and timely textbooks, regulated uniform costs, transport and exam fee support, and stronger academic support within schools. The evidence points in one direction - investing in government schools reduces pressure on households, slows dropouts, and improves equity. It is socially necessary and makes economic sense.

At the Heart of Democracy: Grama Panchayat Libraries in Karnataka

Spoorthi Rao and Kempamani D N

G. Malligere is a Grama Panchayat (GP) in Mandya district, with a landscape typical of the region with fields, irrigation channels, and cultivated land stretching out on either side. I arrived expecting the familiar rhythms of panchayat work. Instead, what stood out was the most active space in the GP, its library.

Geetha has been the librarian here for eighteen years. She studied till Class 10 and has no formal training in library science. Before joining the library, she worked with non-governmental organisations in tribal regions, where she was involved in forest conservation and livelihoods. She says this experience shaped her understanding of people and their everyday struggles.

When the librarian post opened at the G. Malligere GP, she applied without much hesitation. She wanted stable work, something closer to home, and she liked books. The pay was modest when she joined and improved over time.

The first space assigned to the library was an old building with a leaking roof. During the monsoons, water fell onto the shelves and books were damaged. In 2009, the panchayat shifted the library to an unused godown within the campus, where it has functioned ever since.

As the local government school's closing time approached, the sound of the bell carried across the grounds. Children walked towards the library in small groups, their bags slung low. Geetha stood outside, greeting them as they arrived. Three teachers from the government school stopped by with their children before heading home. They spoke briefly; the familiarity between them was easy to see.

The entrance opens into a hall where tables and chairs are pushed close together.

Children sit in small groups, spreading puzzle pieces across the surface and arguing quietly over what fits where. Newspapers and magazines are placed within easy reach. Books are arranged on low shelves, allowing children to choose on their own. An inner room holds a few computers and shelves organised by subject. Two girls sit shoulder to shoulder in front of the computer, moving slowly through a form, reading each line aloud to each other. Older students arrive later. Some read; others finish homework together. A few move between shelves without hurry. It's evident that over time, the library has settled into the daily rhythm of village life.

The children excitedly tell me about the library during the summer holidays and how freely they are able to use the space. They speak of activities such as singing, dancing, knitting, painting, and playing together. On some afternoons, the library spills outdoors, where children watch birds, tend to plants, and learn the names of leaves and flowers growing along the boundary wall of the panchayat garden.

Geetha also spends part of her day speaking with women and other adults about government schemes and entitlements. These conversations are informal. Women stand or sit close together, listening, interrupting, and sharing concerns. On some afternoons, Geetha runs basic tailoring sessions. Many women come even when they do not plan to read. They sit and talk, and conversations stretch without urgency. College students come to study and prepare for entrance examinations, while older adults arrive to read the newspaper and linger over the day's news. Through it all, Geetha listens more than she speaks.

Over the years, the library has seamlessly merged with Geetha's personal life. Toys, games, and storybooks from friends and donors have found their way onto the shelves. She lost her son during the COVID-19 pandemic. Later came the loss of her husband to cancer and her mother to illness. When she speaks of the library, she speaks of it as something that holds her days together.

What is unfolding in G. Malligere is not an isolated story.

In a panchayat in the neighbouring district of Ramanagara, the librarian Shilpa speaks with ease and assurance as panchayat members gather at the entrance of the library building. Conversations move between everyday concerns and future plans. What began as a small reading room has expanded into a computer learning centre serving the entire panchayat. Prize money received after being recognised as the best library in the state has been used to extend the space onto the terrace.

That same day, Bhagya arrives. Neatly dressed and serving tea, she could easily be mistaken for being an office staff. Bhagya runs the panchayat's solid waste management programme, managed entirely by women. She is the sole earning member of her household. Her husband is bedridden following a spinal cord injury, and she is raising three daughters. She uses the library to practise typing, and her daughters come regularly. This is a place she knows well and returns to often. She had not planned to stay that day, but remained after hearing that someone was visiting the GP library.

In another village, Chaitra's library carries a different energy—bright walls, open shelves, children moving easily between rooms. Girls speak without hesitation about wanting to become doctors, teachers, and civil servants. No one lowers their voice when they say it.

Across Karnataka, many Grama Panchayat libraries have become spaces for storytelling sessions, reading circles, art activities, mother–child reading hours, and collaborations with schools, Anganwadis, and health workers. They are among the few remaining public spaces where people across age, caste, and gender can be present together without invitation.

Much of this momentum began during the COVID-19 pandemic. With schools closed, the Rural Development and Panchayat

Raj Department strengthened over 5,600 Grama Panchayat libraries and undertook a large membership drive. Today, more than 5 million children are registered members. Libraries remain open for eight hours a day, including weekends. Librarians receive improved honorariums and have been trained in computer skills and child-friendly engagement. Based on the response, efforts are underway to establish 6,600 more village libraries across Karnataka, ensuring children have access to a library within their own village and keeping public learning at the heart of community life.

The result has been more than increased reading, though that in itself matters deeply. Many children do not have access to books at home. Early reading builds confidence, curiosity, and the ability to imagine a future beyond the immediate.

There is a growing need to strengthen shared public spaces that are steadily disappearing- places where people meet as equals; where women step into leadership; where children find their voice; where communities learn to live with difference before conflict hardens. Grama Panchayat libraries are doing this work quietly and steadily in Karnataka.

Along with expanding access to books, they are shaping how children see themselves and others. This work needs to continue. It needs sustained public investment, attention, and care. It needs recognition that even the smallest public institutions can carry significant democratic weight. At the centre of this work are women like Geetha, Shilpa, Bhagya, and Chaitra, shaping what a public institution can look like when it is rooted in dignity and shared purpose.

Karnataka's experience demonstrates that Grama Panchayat libraries function as one of its core local institutions. Their scale, uptake, and social value call for continuity and expansion. The Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Department and equivalent departments in other states need to recognize GP libraries as essential public institutions, supported by predictable funding, adequate space, trained staff, and clear administrative ownership at the panchayat level. Seen this way, strengthening GP libraries becomes integral to rural development, not peripheral to it.

Taken together, these developments offer clear lessons for state and local governments seeking to rebuild public learning spaces at the grassroots. What follows are practical insights drawn from the functioning of Grama Panchayat libraries in Karnataka.

Key lesson	What it means for libraries
Trust local governments	Give panchayats and municipalities real ownership of libraries, rather than relying on rigid, top-down models
Back trust with support	Pair autonomy with simple guidelines, action-oriented training, and regular opportunities for peer learning
Enable peer exchange	Use exposure visits and experience-sharing so local bodies can learn directly from one another
Pilot at scale	Run large pilots across districts or blocks, allowing effective approaches to be adapted and scaled
Be patient	Expect uneven response and capacity; provide additional handholding where institutions are weaker
Work with civil society	Partner with grassroots NGOs to strengthen quality, outreach, and everyday community use

Together, these lessons point to the quiet but enduring role that local public institutions can play in shaping everyday democratic life. Public libraries are not only about books. They are about learning how to live together, about belonging, imagination, and the quiet rebuilding of democratic life from the ground up. In this sense, they are the foundations of a healthy democracy.

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Funding Teaching Adequately

Arjun Jayadev and Dipa Sinha

India's spending on education is often discussed in terms of headline numbers: public expenditure hovering around 3 to 3.5 percent of GDP, well below the long-standing national commitment of 6 percent. The consequences of this fiscal choice materialises inside classrooms, schools, and labour markets. When we look closely at teacher data—who is hired, on what terms, where they are deployed, and in what numbers—the consequences of persistent underspend become unavoidably clear.

Teachers are the single most important recurring input in school education. Internationally, teacher salaries and related costs typically account for 70–85 percent of public school education expenditure. If a system systematically underfunds education, it will almost inevitably economise on teachers: by hiring fewer of them, paying them less securely, concentrating them unevenly across regions, or some combination of the three. India exhibits all these patterns.

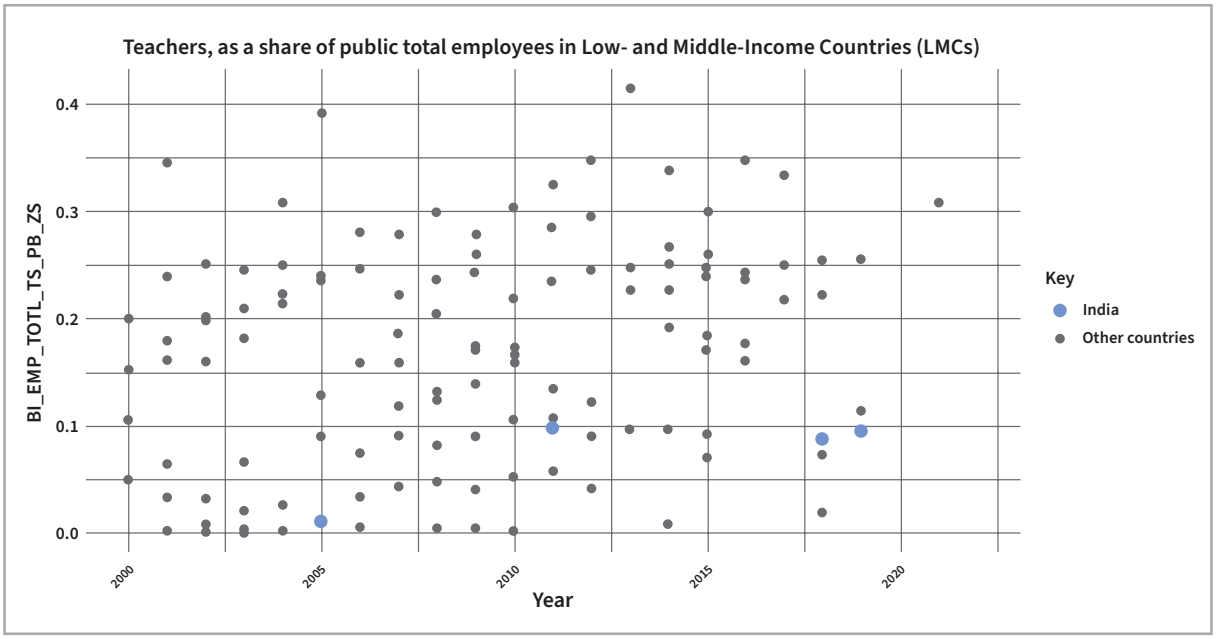
This has direct effects on learning. Pupil Teacher Ratios (PTRs) remain high. High PTRs affect the quality of teaching and strain on teachers. Multi-grade teaching and single teacher schools remain an issue.

High pupil–teacher ratios affect learning outcomes, stretch teachers thin and normalise multi-grade classrooms.

In India, it is reported that there is a shortage of more than one million school teachers. There are not enough sanctioned, funded teaching positions relative to enrolment and even among sanctioned positions huge vacancies exist. Vacancies as a proportion of sanctioned posts at the elementary level have improved from around 21 percent in 2021-22 to 16 percent in 2023-24. However, this is more a reflection of reduction in the number of sanctioned positions from 49.8 lakh to 46.6 lakh rather than an increase in recruitments, with the number of teachers in elementary schools remaining around 39.4 lakhs. Regional variations persist with vacancy rates reaching up to 40 percent in some States.

States cannot deploy teachers they do not employ. Creating posts, recruiting into

Figure 1 below shows that India has a relatively low fraction of teachers as a share of public employees and public formal employment–consistently in the lowest quintile across all lower middle income countries.



them, and paying salaries over decades requires predictable, adequate public financing. Chronic underspend makes such commitments fiscally and politically difficult, pushing States toward short-term fixes. These fixes—multi-grade classrooms, ad hoc subject allocation, or informal increases in teaching load—may keep schools running on paper, but they erode instructional quality.

One of the clearest fingerprints of underfunding is the large and persistent use of contract teachers. According to UDISE+ 2024-25, 16 percent of government school teachers nationally are employed in non-regular contracts (18% female teachers and 14% male teachers).

Contract teachers are cheaper. They are typically paid a fraction of regular teachers' salaries, receive limited or no pensions, and can be hired and dismissed with minimal long-term fiscal liability. For cash-strapped governments, they are an attractive response to the pressure to expand schooling without expanding budgets. Furthermore, the geography of contractualisation is revealing. Around 90 percent of contractual appointments are in rural schools, and are concentrated at the primary level. Some States have a high proportion of contract teachers in the range of 25 to 50 percent. Already under-resourced systems are stretched further. These are unfortunately, also the contexts where stable, experienced teaching matters most: early grades and socially disadvantaged regions. Instead, these schools receive the least secure, least supported segment of the teaching workforce.

Nearly 90% of contract teachers are posted in rural schools often in the primary grades, where stability matters most.

In the recent past, some States appear, at first glance, to have reduced their reliance on contract teachers. However this change largely reflects reclassification rather than genuine regularisation. Teachers were no longer counted as "contractual" in UDISE+, but they continue not to be treated as full state employees. Regularising teachers in a meaningful sense—bringing them onto standard pay scales, pensions, and service protections—requires sustained public spending. Where such spending is politically or fiscally constrained, States resort to definitional shifts. The result is a system that looks healthier on paper than it is in practice.

The distribution of teachers across school types further underscores the role of funding. Government schools educate the majority of India's children, particularly from poorer households, yet they face the greatest staffing stress. Private schools, especially low-fee private schools, often operate with lower PTRs by charging fees and employing young, underpaid teachers. Government schools, constrained by budgets and formal pay scales, cannot easily replicate this model without either raising expenditure or undermining job quality.

The outcome is a bifurcated system. Middle-class families increasingly exit government schools, while government schools themselves operate under tight staffing constraints. This, in turn, weakens political pressure for higher public spending: those with the loudest voices are less directly affected by deteriorating public provision. Underspending thus becomes self-reinforcing.

The teacher data shows that the system has adapted to low spending not by doing "more with less" in any benign sense, but by doing less with less: fewer teachers per child, more insecure employment, and sharper inequalities across regions and social groups.

This also has long-run consequences. Teaching is not a plug-and-play occupation. Quality depends on training, experience, and institutional commitment. A system built on contractualisation and chronic understaffing struggles to attract and retain talented educators, particularly in rural and disadvantaged areas. Over time, this erodes state capacity in education, making future improvements more expensive and harder to implement.

A teaching system built on insecurity struggles to attract experience, retain talent, or build state capacity.

Administrators often frame these constraints in terms of fiscal pressures—limited untied resources, high committed expenditure, and intergovernmental fiscal arrangements. These constraints, while real, mask an underlying issue of prioritisation. Even within tight fiscal envelopes, governments retain choices over what is treated as essential, protected expenditure and what is allowed to adjust at the margin. Education (like health) is a domain where underinvestment is damaging in the long term. The costs of weaker learning outcomes, greater in equality, and diminished state capacity far exceed the short-term savings achieved through post reductions or contractualisation. Making room for medium-term planning for teachers within fiscal frameworks can help,

One reason these patterns persist is the mismatch between the long-term nature of education systems and the short time horizons within which public administration typically operates. Decisions about teacher recruitment, career progression, and

regularisation unfold over many years, while budgets, postings, and political incentives are often annual or episodic. Addressing this mismatch may require institutional design that explicitly aligns fiscal planning with the temporal realities of education: for instance, treating teacher posts as protected committed expenditure, requiring medium-term workforce plans that outlast individual tenures, and explicitly costing the long-term implications of contractual staffing against regular appointments. Without such mechanisms, even well-intentioned administrators remain structurally constrained to prioritise the present over the future, with several costs.

India's underspend on education is a political choice with concrete consequences. High PTRs, widespread contractualisation, rural concentration of insecure teachers, and cosmetic administrative fixes are all rational responses to a system that has decided, implicitly, not to fund education at the level it publicly claims to value.

Without sustained investment in teachers, the promises of the National Education Policy remain structurally out of reach.

Reversing this trajectory requires more than exhortations about efficiency or governance. It requires sustained increases in public spending, specifically targeted at expanding and stabilising the teaching workforce. Without this, ambitions articulated in the National Education Policy—about foundational learning, equity, and quality—will remain structurally unattainable.

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Dipa Sinha works with the Centre for the Study of the Indian Economy (CSIE) at Azim Premji University. She is a development economist whose work focuses on economic and social policy in India, particularly social protection, food and nutrition rights, public health, and gender.

Myths of Competency-Based Assessment: What it is and What it is not

Aanchal Chomal

The focus on assessment reforms in the National Policy on Education (NEP) 2020 is not new. However, the emphasis on ongoing holistic assessments is at odds with the prioritisation of indicators such as enrolment, attendance, infrastructure gaps, and expenditure tracking. In that context, ideas like competency-based learning and assessment can seem distant from day-to-day governance concerns. This article identifies and addresses myths related to competency-based assessment. It put forth the case that this approach necessitates shifts in pedagogy and classroom practices right from the foundational stage, and is therefore critical for assuring quality education.

Competency-Based Assessment (CBA) has become a buzzword in the last few years. Boards across the country are incorporating competency-based questions in their Classes 10 and 12 certification examinations. In response, teachers across school systems are attempting to align their teaching to what is perceived as a changed mandate. Students, too, are often heard expressing anxiety that their final examination will now be 'more competency-based'.

In engagement with teachers and school leaders across various schools, one encounters a range of perceptions about what CBA means, and how students should be 'prepared' for it. This article attempts to surface some of the common myths around CBA and, in doing so, outline key principles for understanding what CBA is—and what it is not.

Myth1- Competency-Based Assessment is a new pattern of board examination paper

Following the assessment reforms proposed in the National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage (NCF-FS 2022) and School Education (NCF-SE 2023), respectively, one of the earliest visible changes introduced by boards was a shift away from rote-based questions towards competency-based ones. Boards such as the Central Board of Secondary Education

(CBSE) led this change, and several others followed. While these reforms were well-intentioned, their immediate manifestation in examination blueprints and circulars led many stakeholders—teachers, parents, and schools—to interpret CBA as a change in the format of board examination papers.

Over time, this perception was reinforced as boards began specifying the percentage of competency-based questions to be included in examinations. As a result, competency-based assessment came to be seen largely as an examination reform rather than a deeper shift in teaching, learning, and assessment practices.

Myth 2- Competency-Based Assessment is relevant only at secondary grades

Closely linked to the first myth is the belief that CBA begins only in Classes 9 and 10. This has led to disproportionate emphasis on CBA at the secondary stage, while assessment in the foundational, preparatory, and middle stages continues to be largely content-driven. This stage-specific understanding of CBA is a direct outcome of viewing competencies primarily through the lens of board examinations.

Myth 3- Competency-Based Assessment only addresses higher-order thinking

Another widespread view is that CBA is concerned only with higher-order thinking skills such as application, analysis, and reasoning. As a result, foundational cognitive capacities—such as the ability to identify, describe, explain, or illustrate concepts—are often seen as outside the scope of CBA. This narrow interpretation overlooks the role of conceptual understanding as a critical component of competence.

Myth 4- Competency-Based Assessment is a western idea and requires specialised training

Taken together, these myths have led many stakeholders to believe that CBA is a Western import that can be designed and implemented only by boards or specialised institutions. It is often perceived as a new and technically complex idea, disconnected from earlier policy thinking in India.

At the heart of these misconceptions lies a limited engagement with the idea of competencies and with what it truly means to assess them. The current confusion also serves as a reminder that assessment reforms, when introduced without corresponding shifts in pedagogy and classroom practice, are unlikely to achieve their intended outcomes. Similar patterns were observed during the introduction of Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) alongside the No Detention Policy.

So, what does competency-based assessment really mean? How does one understand the meaning of competencies as articulated in the National Curriculum Frameworks published post NEP 2020?

Unpacking the meaning of competencies and competency-based assessment

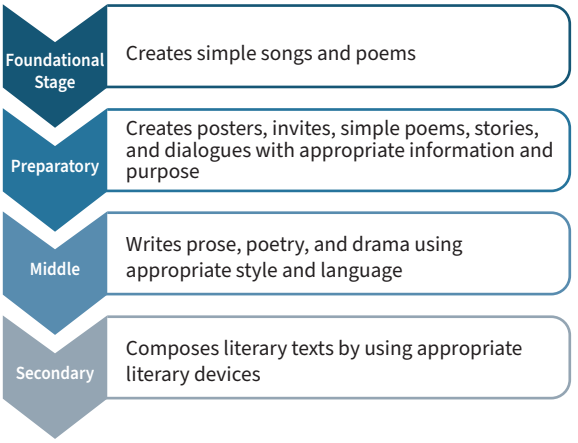
As articulated in the NCF-SE 2023, competencies are learning achievements that are observable and can be assessed systematically. They are subject specific and stage specific, and learners are expected to attain proficiency in them over three to four years of schooling.

In everyday practice, teachers often understand competency in a more generic sense - as the ability to perform something with enough dexterity - like writing an essay, solving a mathematics problem, conducting an experiment, and playing a sport. Such competence stems from an integration of knowledge, skills/abilities, attitudes, behaviour, or characteristics required to perform that task effectively. In school education globally, competencies have often been articulated as broad capacities like critical thinking, problem solving or creative thinking.

However, the competencies listed in the NCF-FS 2022 and NCF-SE 2023 mark a significant shift. These competencies are disciplinary in nature, that is, they are rooted in the curricular areas that learners engage with in schools. They embody core conceptual understanding, subject-specific ways of thinking and working, and the dispositions that education seeks to nurture over time.

Competencies in classroom contexts

Consider the example of language learning. In many classrooms, language teaching has traditionally focused on memorising the content of prescribed textbooks- stories, poems, plays. The competencies articulated across stages, however, foreground a different expectation: the ability to express, compose, create, and communicate meaningfully across contexts and modes.



Competencies across stages

Here, the role of textbooks is not to be mastered as content in themselves, but to provide exposure to forms, genres, and styles that enable learners to engage deeply with texts – drawing meaning, interpreting ideas, and eventually composing their own oral and written work. These competencies are developed progressively over several years, not within a single unit or academic year.

For teachers, this underscores the importance of understanding subject competencies while designing lesson plans and classroom tasks. Without a shift from

content-focused pedagogy to competency-focused teaching–learning processes, merely changing assessment formats will not result in meaningful CBA. This directly challenges the notion that CBA is only a change in examination patterns. It also addresses the misconception that competencies are relevant only at the secondary stage; in the current curriculum frameworks, competencies are clearly articulated across all stages and subjects.

Progression within competencies

A defining feature of competencies is their coherent progression across stages. For instance, in social science, a competency in the middle-stage may require students to explain key natural phenomena and their spatial distribution, while at the secondary stage, students are expected to draw interlinkages between components of the physical environment. This progression reflects increasing conceptual depth and disciplinary engagement rather than a simple increase in difficulty.

Competencies also show progression within a stage. Learners move from identifying, describing, and explaining concepts to analysing relationships, applying ideas to real-life contexts, and eventually generating explanations or solutions. These forms of understanding—often dismissed as "lower order"—are, in fact, essential foundations for more complex thinking. Recognising this progression helps dispel the myth that competency-based assessment focuses only on higher-order skills.

For teachers, engaging meaningfully with CBA requires attention to this developmental trajectory. Classroom tasks must be designed to scaffold learners along this continuum, while generating sufficient evidence to understand where students are in their learning.

Middle

C-2.1 Recognises elements of the continued prevalence of certain beliefs, relationships, practices, and activities in human society, notwithstanding major changes in society.

C-6.1 Explains key natural phenomena such as climate, weather, ocean cycles, soil formation, the flow of rivers, and how they are spatially distributed .

C-8.1 Understands the need for a constitution for any country during the last few centuries – especially in a country such as India – and its deeper objectives

Secondary

C-1.3 Traces aspects of continuity and change in different phases of history across the Indian subcontinent (including cultural trends, social and religious trends and reforms, and economic and political transformations)

C- 4.3 Draws inter-linkages between various components of the physical environment, such as climate and relief, climate and vegetation, vegetation, and wildlife

C-5.1 Understands that the Indian Constitution draws from the great cultural heritage and common aspirations of the Indian nation, and recalls India's early experiments with democracy (assemblies in Mahajanapadas, kingdoms and empires at several levels of the society, guilds, sanghas and ganas, village councils and committees, Uthiramerur inscriptions

C-7.2 Evaluates the importance of the three sectors of production (primary, secondary, and tertiary) in any country's economy, especially India

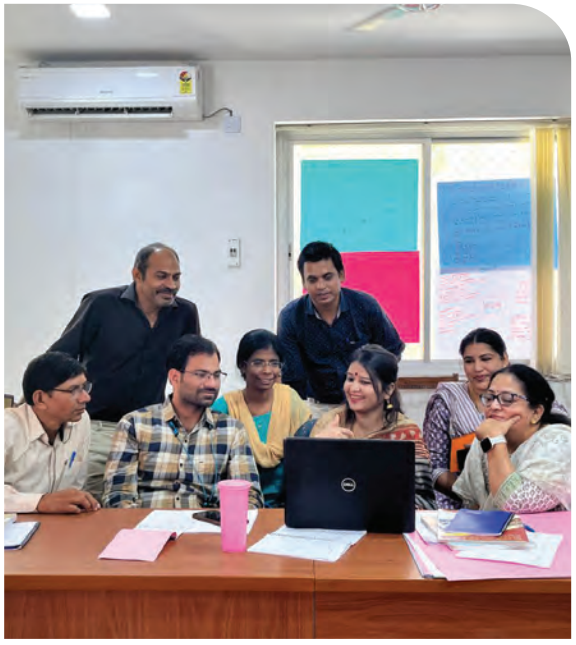
Role of formative assessment and evidence

Attainment of competencies cannot be reliably captured through a single assessment event. The phrase "assessed systematically" in the definition of competencies is crucial

here. Competencies need to be broken down into grade-appropriate milestones and assessed over time using multiple methods.

Formative assessment practices—such as purposeful questioning, worksheets, observation of group work, student discussions, and classroom tasks—play a central role in generating evidence of learning. These everyday practices allow teachers to notice progress, identify gaps, and adjust instruction, making CBA an integral part of teaching rather than an additional burden.

In essence, competencies are closely aligned with the curricular aims of each subject and are nested within broader curricular goals. Unless educators clearly see this relationship between subject aims, curricular goals, competencies, and classroom practice, competency-based assessment is unlikely to be implemented meaningfully.



Multiple methods of assessment needed for effective competency-based assessment

Given the nature of competencies, no single assessment method can capture them fully. A range of tools and processes is required to build a reliable picture of student learning over time. Many such methods, such as projects, portfolios, rubrics, and performance tasks, are already familiar to teachers and widely used in schools.

The challenge, therefore, is not the introduction of new tools, but their alignment with subject competencies. Seen in this way, CBA is neither a new concept nor does it require specialised technical expertise. Rather, it is part of sustained efforts over the past few decades to improve educational quality through clearer articulation of learning standards, sound pedagogical principles, and appropriate assessment approaches. Understanding these underlying ideas is key to practicing competency-based assessment effectively.

Concluding comments

Transitioning from content-based teaching-learning and assessment to a competency-based approach is neither simple nor immediate. It requires a fundamental shift in stakeholder perspectives of what is worth learning in schools, how teaching is organised and how evidence of learning is gathered and used. To make this transition, **competencies must be understood** comprehensively by all key stakeholders.

Competency-based assessment cannot be achieved through a one-time change in examination patterns. It demands sustained attention to nurturing competencies through everyday classroom practice, supported by multiple assessment methods and ongoing formative feedback. Both formative and summative assessments need to be deliberately designed to elicit meaningful evidence of student learning. Periodic consolidation of this evidence will give us a sense of our students' progress in these competencies.

Seen in this context, CBA is best understood not as an isolated assessment reform, but as

part of a long-term systemic effort to align curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment—so that learning, rather than testing, remains at the centre of the education system. Seeing CBA in continuity, and in the context of the larger education reforms, becomes quite critical to enable this approach to unfold effectively on ground.

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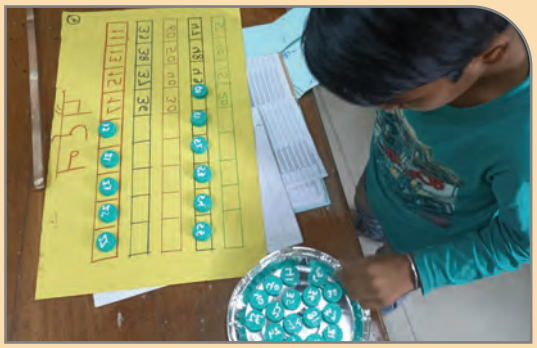


NIPUN Shikshak: A Demonstration based Capacity Building Programme

Sandeep Diwakar

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 cites concern about the 'learning crisis' due to the fact that large numbers of students are unable to attain Foundational Literacy and Numeracy goals. It states that 'The rest of this Policy will become relevant for our students only if this most basic learning requirement (i.e., reading, writing, and arithmetic at the foundational level) is first achieved'. To this end, national- and state-level efforts are ongoing. This article highlights one such initiative that remains underway at the time of writing.

Teacher capacity is central to improving student learning. Professional development must be delivered in multiple formats and sustained across the year, with design and implementation anchored close to the school. This allows training to respond to local classroom realities rather than follow a one-size-fits-all model. It also creates space for peer learning and builds teacher communities that provide ongoing informal support.

One example is the NIPUN Shikshak programme, conceptualised over four years and implemented since 2024–25 across seven districts of Madhya Pradesh (Bhopal, Damoh, Dhar, Khargone, Sagar, Sehore and Vidisha) covering 36 blocks and 315 clusters.

Need for a decentralised model of professional development

In a large State like Madhya Pradesh, with nearly 1.29 lakh primary school teachers, professional development is typically designed at the State level and implemented at the district and block levels through trained resource persons. Programme design is informed by teacher needs assessments conducted through online surveys, feedback from training institutions, student performance in Classes 5 and 8, and learning gaps identified in national assessments conducted by PARAKH. Trainers such as State Resource Groups (SRGs), District Resource Groups (DRGs), and Master Trainers (MTs) are selected through written tests and structured discussions.

Although the quality of design and modules has improved over time, many teachers report that training activities are difficult to translate into classroom practice. The main concerns relate to a one-size-fits-all approach and limited follow-up support. NIPUN Shikshak seeks to address this gap by shifting both design and implementation closer to the cluster level. The programme focuses on addressing context-specific classroom challenges and creates structured opportunities for peer learning and demonstration among teachers working in nearby schools.

Approach of the NIPUN Shikshak programme

The NIPUN Shikshak programme uses two models of teacher professional development

- Demonstration classes conducted in real classrooms
- Cluster-level meetings, which is also known as Shaikshik Samvaad

Demonstration classes

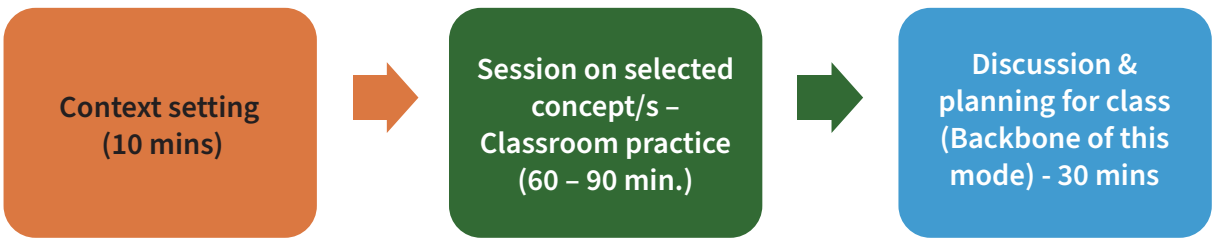
Demonstration sessions are organised separately for teachers of classes 1–2 and classes 3–5 in Hindi and Mathematics.

Each session begins with mapping the selected topic to the State's foundational literacy and numeracy goals. The syllabus coverage is reviewed with the identified teacher(s), and a quick assessment is conducted to understand students' current learning levels.

Teachers then collaboratively select the learning outcomes, prepare a lesson plan and teaching materials, and conduct the class while other teachers observe the session.

The teachers who are observing the class are provided with a reference sheet to

Process of demonstration class



record their observations. This sheet captures details about the teacher, students, learning outcomes, and instructional strategies. It also guides the post-demonstration discussion and helps teachers reflect on classroom practice.

Structured discussions before and after the demonstration create opportunities for reflection and peer learning.

Shaikshik Samvaad

Shaikshik Samvaad is a structured academic discussion that is held during monthly cluster-level meetings attended by teachers of Classes 1 to 5. Given their academic focus, separate sessions are organised for Language and Mathematics teachers.

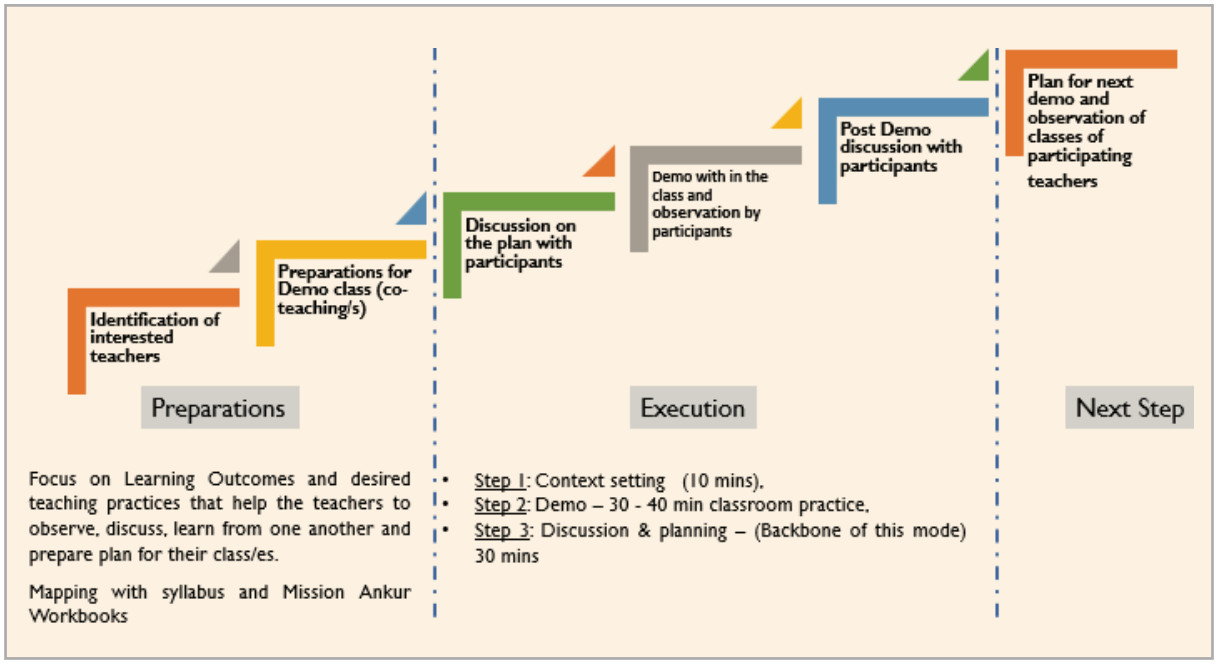
These meetings typically centre on specific learning outcomes and the sharing of classroom practices. An expert or a participating teacher may lead a session on the selected concept. Teachers reflect on both the conceptual aspects and their classroom experiences, creating space for peer learning. Each meeting concludes with a concrete plan for classroom transaction, including strategies and materials to be developed or sourced.

Process of Shaikshik Samvaad

To ensure effective programme management, the Rajya Shiksha Kendra is supported by a dedicated team from identified NGOs. This team tracks activities, coverage, and overall impact, while providing critical implementation support across both modes. Their role includes maintaining standardised documentation and ensuring the seamless flow of reports from the cluster up to the State level. Additionally, they work with the teachers directly and facilitate the Shaikshik Samvaad agenda.

Operational Design of NIPUN Shikshak programme

In Year 1 (2024–25) of the NIPUN Shikshak programme, clusters within each block were divided into two equal cohorts. Teachers in Cohort 1 attended demonstration classes, while those in Cohort 2 participated in monthly cluster-level meetings (Shaikshik Samvaad). In Year 2 (2025–26), the modes were swapped: Cohort 1 joined



Shaikshik Samvaad, and Cohort 2 attended demonstration classes.

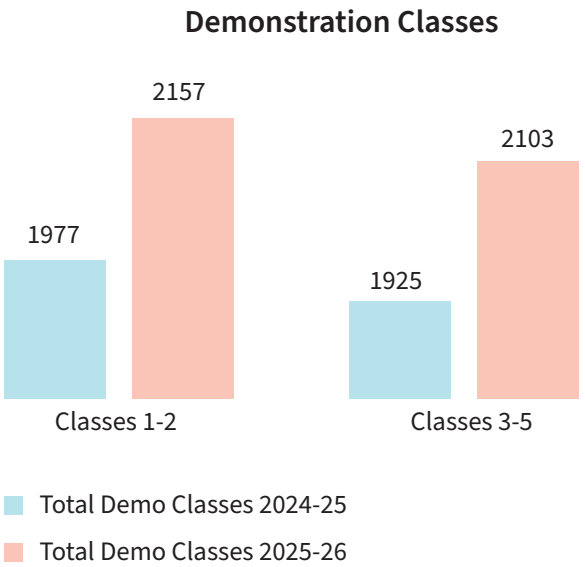
Each cluster selected for demonstration classes was further divided into 3–4 sub-clusters, each comprising 5–6 nearby primary schools. Demonstration classes rotated among these schools so that all teachers could observe and participate, ensuring no group was too large to limit engagement.

For Shaikshik Samvaad, monthly cluster-level meetings were held for both cohorts. Teachers were organised into two groups: those teaching Classes 1–2 and those teaching Classes 3–5.

In Years 3 (2026–27) and 4 (2027–28), demonstration classes are planned for all clusters.

Influence of the programme

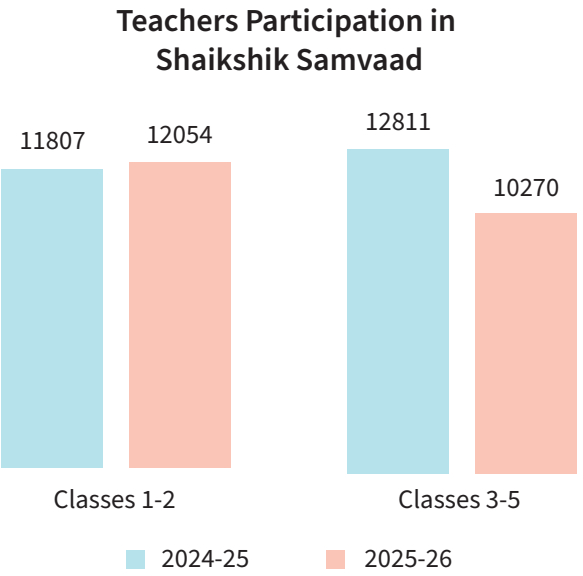
Participation



Demonstration classes organised in Madhya Pradesh so far since July 2024 to Dec 2025

In 2024–25, 72 percent of teachers in the district participated in either demonstration classes or Shaikshik Samvaad, this increased to 76 percent in 2025–26.

Shaikshik Samvaad (monthly cluster level meetings) were held for the teachers of classes 1–2 and classes 3-5 separately almost all the months from July to February. In 2024-25, total participants were 11807 and 12811 for classes 1-2 and 3-5, respectively. In 2025-26, total participants were 12054 and 10270 for classes 1-2 and 3-5, respectively.



Implications for learning

Two separate assessments measured student outcomes for teachers participating in the programme. The results showed improvements in mean achievement of students in both Language and Mathematics.

Overall, both assessments indicate that student achievement improved across classes and subjects, demonstrating a positive impact of the programme.

Subject	Class	Improvement in the mean achievement of students in study 1 (%)	Improvement in the mean achievement of students in study 2 (%)
Language	3	20.91	17.55
	4	10.00	15.29
	5	20.67	16.30
Mathematics	3	36.97	18.25
	4	19.00	12.77
	5	14.50	10.47

Effects on processes – systemic and school-level

Many teachers who participated in the programme have since been selected as Master Trainers (MTs) or Key Resource Persons (KRPs) for other in-service teacher training initiatives.

Observation of demonstration classes has boosted teachers' confidence and improved their classroom practice, with a greater emphasis on identifying learning outcomes and planning lessons effectively.

The programme has also enriched the learning environment, with around 2,500 classrooms now featuring print-rich materials, including reading and subject corners developed specifically for the initiative.

Challenges

While most teachers were able to conduct demonstration classes effectively on basic concepts such as reading stories or numbers and operations, they faced difficulties with slightly more complex topics, including comprehension, division, and fractions.

Demonstration lesson in progress

Conducting demonstration classes in multigrade classrooms also proved challenging. Teachers from single-teacher schools often could not participate in Shaikshik Samvaad or observe other demonstration classes, as no one else could be left in charge of their school. In such cases, co-teaching or discussion sessions were planned within their own schools.

Additionally, since many teachers were not accustomed to formally recording observations, facilitating rich post-demonstration discussions was difficult. While the reference sheet format provided structure, facilitators were sometimes needed to guide the discussion effectively.

Way forward

In 2026–27, the third year of the programme, demonstration classes will be organised in at least 70 percent of clusters. Content areas, learning outcomes, and teaching practices from the past two years have been mapped by subject and grade level, providing teachers and functionaries with a clear framework to address field-level needs.

Teachers who participated in demonstration classes and Shaikshik Samvaad sessions over the past two years will serve as mentors for their peers. Building on this experience, it is expected that teachers will increasingly document their work, processes, and changes in classroom practice.

Given that most teachers have found this model of professional development highly effective, efforts will focus on strengthening it further and expanding its reach to additional districts.

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Closure is Not the Only Answer: Rethinking Small Schools in India

The Editorial Team

India currently has around 1,04,125 single-teacher schools[1]. In many States, these schools are increasingly viewed as inefficient and are being considered for consolidation or closure as part of broader efforts to improve infrastructure and resource use.

Yet the presence of these small schools is not accidental. It is the result of decades of policy decisions that prioritised bringing schooling closer to children's homes. To sustainably reform the system, we must first understand how this landscape emerged.

The historical origins: How did we get here?

The prevalence of small schools is deeply rooted in our access-driven policies. Faced with a large population of out-of-school children, the government chose to take schools to children's habitations. In the 1980s and early 1990s, many programmes[2] were launched with bilateral assistance from International Aid or Development organizations[3]. These efforts focused heavily on micro-planning and mobilising local communities to bridge the access gap. This ethos evolved into several State initiatives which guaranteed a school if a community reported a certain number of out-of-school children. These policies had two lasting effects:

- They successfully brought schools to the most marginalised, remote, and tribal habitations. They are among the main reasons why India achieved impressive enrolment spikes in the 1990s. This sheer push for enrolment resulted in undeniable literacy gains, particularly for women, whose literacy rate went

1 *https://sansad.in/getFile/annex/269/AS45_0WOHpO.pdf?source=pqars*
2 *Lok Jumbish in Rajasthan and the Andhra Pradesh Primary Education Programme (APPEP)*
3 *UNICEF, SIDA, and ODA*

from 39.91 percent in 1991 to nearly 74.6 percent in 2023-24.

- Many of these schools operated with minimal infrastructure and basic facilities. As a result, the poorest and most socially disadvantaged children often ended up studying in under-resourced schools. Gradually, the focus shifted from building fully funded and adequately staffed schools to accepting makeshift arrangements as a stopgap. Over time, this contributed to the emergence of a multi-tiered education system.

The economic backdrop

Following the 1991 economic crisis, India undertook a debt-based expansion of its public education system. The District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), launched with substantial external assistance, marked a large-scale effort to expand and decentralise primary education in low-literacy districts.

This expansion led to the rapid opening of new schools, particularly in smaller habitations. However, teacher recruitment did not keep pace. To manage costs and avoid long-term financial commitments, several States relied on contract teachers and delayed regular appointments. As a result, many newly established schools began functioning with only one teacher.

Over time, this imbalance between school expansion and teacher recruitment contributed to the large number of single-teacher schools that exist today. Limited State budgets, declining central support, and the difficulty of attracting teachers to remote areas further compounded the problem.

The sequencing of access first and quality later helped increase enrolment but left many schools understaffed. These instructional gaps disproportionately affected children from marginalised communities, who were

Students wade across a river to reach their school from a nearby settlement in a remote forest area. In regions like these, where road connectivity and transport infrastructure are absent, school consolidation must be approached with extreme caution as closing the nearest school could mean children simply stop attending altogether.

more likely to attend smaller and poorly resourced schools. Although the Right to Education (RTE) Act later introduced norms for infrastructure and teacher–pupil ratios, implementation has remained uneven, and many small schools continue to operate with limited staff.

Demographic shifts

India's demographic landscape has changed significantly over the past two decades. According to NFHS-5, the country's Total Fertility Rate (TFR) has declined to 2.0, below the replacement level. In several large States, it has fallen further, ranging between 1.6 and 1.7. This shift has important implications for the Government school enrolments in some rural areas. Many schools were sanctioned using earlier Census data, district mapping exercises, and local political demands at a time when enrolment projections were much higher. As a result, a number of schools that once served larger cohorts now operate with far fewer students.

Seasonal migration further complicates this picture. In many regions, children move with their families for work during parts of the year, disrupting attendance in rural schools while creating fluctuating enrolments in urban ones. Together, demographic decline and migration have reinforced the presence of very small schools, some of which now operate with only a single teacher.

The limits of enrolment based school rationalisation

Faced with a large number of small schools, States often turn to simple enrollment thresholds to make a decision. For e.g. If a school falls below a number of 20-30 students, it becomes eligible for merger or closure. While administratively straightforward, this formula-driven approach risks oversimplifying complex ground realities.

- Geographic and social realities: Mechanical consolidation overlooks terrain, transport access, safety concerns, and social divisions that determine if a child will actually attend a merged school.
- Social disruption: Small schools are often closely tied to local settlement patterns and community life. Closing them treats size as a technical flaw rather than a structural reality, potentially weakening the everyday connection between the school and the community and making access more difficult for younger children.

A context-sensitive approach to small schools

If closing small schools affects the access of the children, reforms should focus on improving teaching in these schools rather than closing them based only on enrolment numbers. This requires redesigning governance and academic support structures.

Formal academic clustering

Academic clustering enables small schools to function as part of a network of geographically proximate schools. To be effective, clustering must be formally structured and clearly defined, in line with the vision of school complexes proposed in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

1. Schools within an academic cluster should lie within a realistic and context-sensitive radius, i.e., walkable for younger children and within a manageable distance for older students. Distances should be established with transport feasibility explicitly assessed.
2. Each academic cluster should be officially notified with defined boundaries. One school may serve as the lead institution for administrative coordination, supported by a designated cluster academic coordinator with clearly assigned responsibilities, decision-making authority, and protected time for the role.

3. Academic calendars, timetables, and subject allocations should be aligned across cluster schools. This enables subject-specific teachers to contribute meaningfully across institutions rather than remaining confined to a single campus with limited enrolment.

Structured teacher sharing

Within an academic cluster, shared teachers can deepen subject instruction. However, this requires moving beyond informal, ad-hoc arrangements. Effective teacher sharing depends on:

- Formally notified rosters: Teacher deployment must be predictable, timetable-aligned, and officially documented.
- Cross-site attendance tracking: Mobile attendance systems should be in place to ensure accountability.
- Scheduled travel time: Travel must be built into timetables, so it does not silently reduce teaching hours. Standardised travel and hardship allowances should reflect distance and terrain.
- Clear reporting authority: Each shared teacher must have one designated reporting head and salary-drawing authority to avoid diffused accountability.

Recognising and responding to multi-grade teaching

Even with school clustering, many small schools will continue to function as multi-grade institutions. Multi-grade teaching, therefore, remains a common classroom reality.

- The State should explicitly recognise multi-grade schools as a distinct category for planning. While such arrangements may be necessary in small or sparsely populated habitations, they should be treated as a pragmatic response rather than a pedagogical ideal, continuing only until sufficient teachers are recruited to enable single-grade instruction where feasible.
- Teachers should receive training in multi-grade pedagogy, along with opportunities for peer learning and exchange.
- Textbooks and teaching–learning materials, which currently assume single-grade instruction, need to be adapted for multi-grade classrooms.
- Expectations around syllabus coverage and learning levels should account for the realities of multi-grade classrooms. Assuming outcomes similar to monograde settings can place unrealistic demands on teachers and students.

A single teacher attends to children across multiple age groups in a Rural Govt School. Despite limited resources, these teachers form the backbone of primary education in remote communities and often, the only educational touchpoint children have access to.

When clustering is not feasible: alternative measures

Safeguard area	Key conditions / Actions
1. Distance Norms – Ensure no child's access worsens	• < 1 km: Reorganisation may proceed without transport. • 1–3 km: Safe, reliable transport must be formally provided. • > 3 km: Merger should not be permitted.
2. Transport planning – Viable transport rather than just transport allowances	• Develop a clear transport model, including budget and vehicle arrangements. • Pilot the model for at least one year before statewide scaleup. • Ensure coordination with the Transport Department for safety and continuity.
3. Community consent	• Prior consent of SDMCs and Gram Panchayats. • Block Education Officers to facilitate engagement where committees are inactive. • Mandatory consultations with documented resolutions and social audit records.
4. Equity safeguards to protect vulnerable student groups	• Assess impact on SC/ST, tribal, minority, and differently-abled children. • Ensure access conditions do not deteriorate post-reorganisation.
5. Post-implementation monitoring – Track student outcomes, not just enrolment	• Monitor attendance patterns following school shifts. • Track dropout and transfer trends at the district level. • Assess whether academic functioning has improved.

Conclusion

India's small schools are the result of an access-driven expansion that carried education into even the most remote habitations. That achievement should not be undone through mechanical, enrolment-based responses. The real challenge is to ensure that these schools function effectively. Academic clustering, structured teacher sharing, and recognition of multi-grade realities offer ways to strengthen instructional quality without compromising access. Where mergers become unavoidable, they must proceed with appropriate safeguards.

The expansion of access over the past three decades has been a major achievement. The next phase of reform must strengthen quality without weakening that foundation. The question, therefore, should shift from Should this school exist, to how can this school be strengthened and supported? Education reform will ultimately be judged by its ability to improve learning outcomes without pushing the most vulnerable children further away from school.

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Bal Shodh Mela: From Pedagogic Event to Systemic Practice

Deepak Dixit

There is something profound about watching children fully absorbed in learning at a Bal Shodh Mela. In different corners of a school, student groups debate the accuracy of measurements, return from the village with interview notes from elders, rehearse presentations on water conservation, or calculate the area of their school ground with focused intensity. Abstract curricular concepts are worked through concrete situations, and visible learning is underway.

For State and district education administrators, however, such learning experiences for children remain an exception. Despite the clear pedagogic direction laid out in NEP 2020 and the NCF-SE 2023, implementation on the ground continues to be uneven. Experiential and inquiry-based learning often appears in the form of isolated activities or annual events, while day-to-day classroom practice usually is connected to textbook completion and syllabus coverage. During school visits, officers often focus on things which are procedural, such as tracking syllabus completion or the rollout of government programmes, rather than examining classroom processes that indicate meaningful learning.

What is Bal Shodh Mela?

'Shodh' refers to inquiry or exploration. The Bal Shodh Mela is a structured pedagogic process based on the premise that children learn by asking questions, observing their surroundings, collecting and analysing information, and drawing conclusions. Teachers function as facilitators, while the local environment becomes a central learning resource.

Implemented over two to four weeks, students identify questions rooted in their curriculum and lived context, mapped to learning outcomes across subjects. Typical inquiries include documenting village resources, calculating school spaces, analysing occupations, household energy use, or recording local histories.

The ‘mela’ serves as a point of consolidation. Students present their work through charts, models, narratives, demonstrations, and discussions. The focus is not just on what students produce at the end, but on how they ask questions, gather information, and arrive at their answers. Practised across States such as Chhattisgarh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttarakhand, the Bal Shodh Mela, when implemented with intent, functions as a repeatable classroom process aligned with curricular goals.

Importantly for administrators, this process makes classroom practice visible. Student work, questions, and presentations offer concrete evidence that can be observed and discussed during school visits and academic reviews. Unlike many initiatives, the Bal Shodh Mela does not require new approvals, additional budgets, or parallel reporting structures. It works within existing timetables and curricular frameworks, offering a low-risk, system-compatible lever for strengthening classroom practice.

What officers can look for during school visits?

For education administrators, the Bal Shodh Mela provides a practical way to observe and review classroom processes during routine school visits and academic reviews. Instead of relying only on syllabus tracking or programme compliance, officers can look for the following indicators of meaningful learning:

- Are students’ questions visible in notebooks, wall displays, or classroom discussions?
- Does a single inquiry reflect learning across multiple subjects, such as language, mathematics, and environmental studies?
- Can students explain how they arrived at an answer, not just what the answer is?
- Is student work based on observation, measurement, interviews, or data collected from the local context?
- Is the teacher able to clearly articulate the learning outcomes being addressed through the inquiry?

These indicators help shift review conversations from activity completion to classroom practice and student understanding. Over time, they allow administrators to track whether inquiry-based pedagogy is becoming part of routine teaching at the cluster, block, and district levels.

Connecting classroom practice to policy intent: Alignment with NEP 2020 and NCF-SE 2023

The Bal Shodh Mela closely reflects the pedagogic direction outlined in NEP 2020 and NCF-SE 2023 in three key ways.

First, it operationalises inquiry-based learning. Students frame questions, gather evidence, revise assumptions, and articulate findings, shifting classroom practice away from rote coverage towards conceptual understanding.

Second, it enables curricular integration. A single inquiry often brings together writing and oral expression, data collection and representation, scientific observation, and social analysis.

Third, it anchors learning in a local context. By drawing directly on children's environments, the Bal Shodh Mela aligns with the policy emphasis on meaningful, contextually grounded education without relying on additional materials or parallel programmes.

Crucially, the Bal Shodh Mela does not add to curricular load. Instead, it reframes how existing learning outcomes are achieved, offering a practical route for translating policy intent into everyday classroom practice.

Implications for teaching practice

For teachers, the Bal Shodh Mela functions as sustained professional learning embedded within classroom work. Planning inquiries aligned to curricular goals, scaffolding students' questioning, and observing how understanding develops over time often leads to a shift from completing textbook exercises to designing learning experiences.

Across States, teachers report higher student engagement, stronger oral expression, and clearer connections between everyday experience and academic concepts. Over time, this process strengthens teacher confidence in using inquiry as a regular pedagogic approach rather than a special activity.

Conditions for sustainability

A persistent policy concern in public education is sustainability. Many school-level initiatives falter because they remain event-based, externally driven, or dependent on short-term momentum.

Evidence from States such as Uttarakhand indicates that the Bal Shodh Mela sustains when it is embedded within routine systems rather than launched as a special drive. In districts where the practice has endured, ownership has typically rested at the cluster or block level, with inquiries planned, supported, and reviewed through regular CRC and BRC meetings. Reviews focus on classroom processes and student work rather than event management, allowing administrators to monitor quality through existing forums without creating parallel mechanisms.

Within this framing, several enabling conditions appear critical:

- Bal Shodh Melas should be positioned as a pedagogic process rather than an annual event, with the substantive work taking place over several weeks in classrooms.
- Explicit mapping of inquiries to curricular learning outcomes reassures teachers that inquiry-based work supports syllabus expectations rather than competing with them.
- Implementation is most effective when it begins at the cluster level with small groups of willing teachers, enabling peer learning and gradual diffusion of practice.
- Ongoing academic support matters more than one-time training, with experiential orientations, classroom-level scaffolding, and structured reflection meetings.
- Process-focused assessment, implemented through observation notes, student work samples, and teacher reflections, aligns with the NEP's emphasis on formative assessment while minimising performative pressures.

- Carefully guided community engagement can strengthen school–community relationships without displacing classroom learning with ceremonial activities.

When inquiry cycles are conducted periodically—quarterly or biannually—they begin to blend into everyday teaching practice. Over time, the Bal Shodh Mela becomes a visible marker of ongoing classroom work rather than a standalone event, supporting both pedagogic depth and administrative oversight.

Implications for education administrators: Lessons for district and State leadership

For education administrators under pressure to demonstrate NEP-aligned change, the Bal Shodh Mela offers a rare combination: visible shifts in classroom practice, strong teacher ownership, minimal financial cost, and alignment with existing academic review and monitoring structures. For administrators, the Bal Shodh Mela offers several practical insights:

1. Pedagogic reform is primarily about changing classroom processes, not introducing new programmes.
2. Teachers adopt inquiry-based methods when they are supported through planning, scaffolding, and reflection rather than compliance.
3. Cluster- and block-level platforms are effective sites for demonstrating and spreading practice.
4. Learning evidence is strongest when drawn from processes, not performances.

Most importantly, the Bal Shodh Mela demonstrates that NEP-aligned pedagogy is achievable within existing public school systems.

Conclusion

The Bal Shodh Mela demonstrates how meaningful classroom reform can emerge from within existing public school systems. Its significance lies in showing that sustained pedagogic change does not depend on new schemes or additional inputs, but on clearer instructional processes, ongoing academic support, and purposeful use of existing review structures.

For public education systems tasked with translating the intent of NEP 2020 and NCF-SE 2023 into everyday classroom practice, the Bal Shodh Mela offers a credible and low-disruption pathway. It strengthens teaching and learning while remaining administratively feasible, making classroom processes visible without creating parallel programmes or additional reporting burdens.

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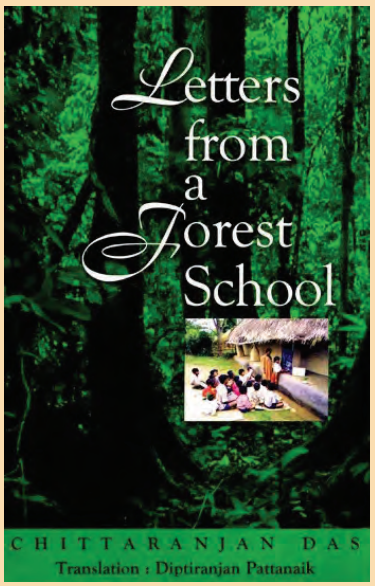
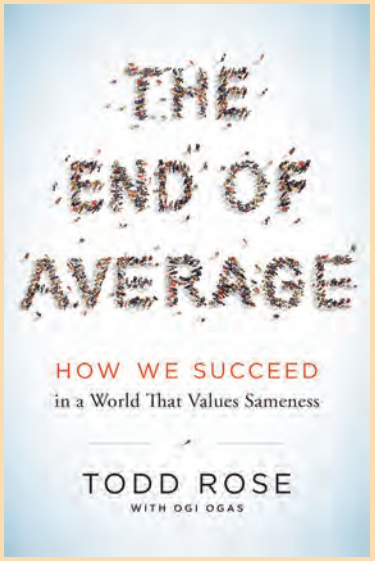
From the Bookshelf



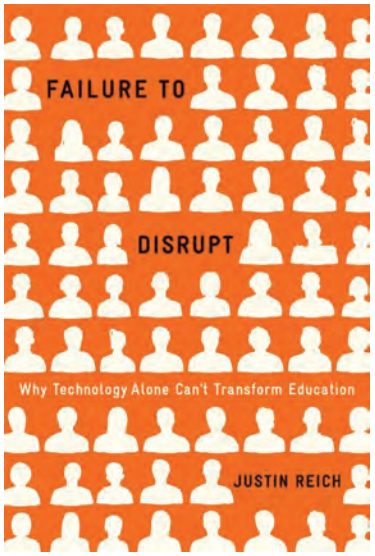
Letters from a Forest School
by Chittaranjan Das
National Book Trust, 168 Pages

This book is a compelling narrative of an educational experiment that defied the dominant logic of schooling in post-Independence India. Written as a series of letters from a basic school in the forests of Odisha in the 1950s, it captures a lived philosophy of education rooted in work, community, empathy, and moral courage. The book challenges rote learning, bureaucratic domination, and narrow meritocratic thinking, asking what we truly value as learning. At a time when policy debates prioritise scale and efficiency, the book remains strikingly relevant to discussions on assessment, teacher autonomy, and the purpose of schooling.



The End of Average
by Todd Rose
Penguin, 256 pages

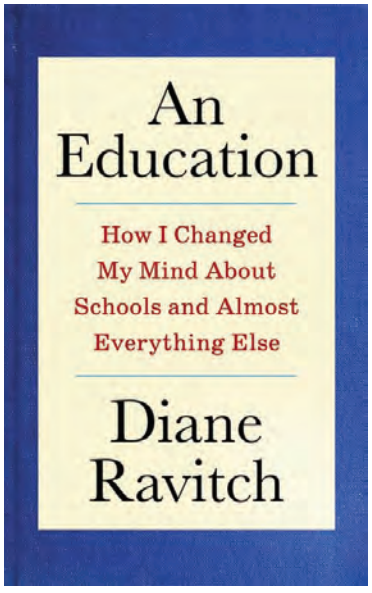
This book dismantles the one size fits all logic that shapes our education system, arguing that designing for a mythical average student ultimately serves no one. It shows how standardised models stifle individual potential and introduces three transformative principles such as jaggedness, context, and pathways, to reimagine how learning and talent are developed. Drawing lessons from both schools and corporate hiring, the book offers a roadmap for shifting toward flexible, competency-based systems that value individual strengths over industrial-age metrics. A compelling call to rebuild institutions to finally fit the diverse people they are meant to serve.



Failure to Disrupt: Why Technology Alone Can't Transform Education
by Justin Reich

Harvard University Press, 312 pages

Offering a sobering assessment of the edtech revolution, this book explains why technology has largely failed to transform education. It traces this failure to outdated learning models, the assimilation of tools into existing routines, the exacerbation of inequality (the 'Matthew Effect'), and the inability to assess complex skills. True change requires modest, context-aware improvements rather than technological silver bullets.



An Education: How I Changed My Mind About Schools and Almost Everything Else
by Diane Ravitch

Columbia University Press, 248 pages

The author, an influential voice in education, offers a reflective memoir that retraces her intellectual journey from an early supporter of standards, testing, and charter schools to a sharp critic of those same reforms. Blending personal reflection with policy critique, she details the evolution of her views on education, equity, and student learning. Drawing on decades of experience, the book questions widely held assumptions about reform and accountability.

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Learning Curve is a magazine reimagined for those shaping and influencing education policy and practice. It serves as a resource for policymakers, bureaucrats, government officials, and key decision-makers in public education.

The magazine delves into education policy, implementation, curriculum design, financing, and systemic reforms, offering insights into their real-world impact. Through expert analysis, case studies, and discussions on emerging trends, *Learning Curve* bridges the gap between policy and practice to support informed decision-making for a stronger education system.

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