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.

References

- Diwan, R. (2015). Small schools in rural India: ‘Exclusion’ and ‘inequity’ in hierarchical school system. Policy Futures in Education, 13(2), 187–204.
- Kumar, K., Priyam, M., & Saxena, S. (2001). Looking beyond the smokescreen: DPEP and primary education in India. Economic and Political Weekly, 36(7), 560–568.
- Praveen, M. G., & Safwan, C. P. (2015). Ethnographic study of a single teacher school in Kerala. Journal of Indian Education, August 2015 issue.
- Ramachandran, V. (2012). Can rights go wrong? The RTE conundrum in India. India International Centre Quarterly, 39(1), 56–63. http://www.jstor.com/stable/41804019.
- Ranjenekar, D. K. (n.d.). Schools with just one teacher. Civil Society Online. Retrieved from https://www.civilsocietyonline.com/column/back-to-school/schools-with-just-one-teacher.
- Rao, S. S., Ganguly, S., Singh, J., & Dash, R. R. (2017). School closures and mergers study. Save the Children. Zakir Husain Centre for Educational Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University.
- Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+). (2024–25). UDISE+ 2024–25 data. Ministry of Education, Government of India.