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Ph. Studio/December, 1957/K.L., A46e/A12d. Ramnagar Village in Pilana N.E.S. Block, Meerut Distt. In U.P. (November 19, 1957). A view of a junior school for girls at Dhakuli. Public Resource via Internet Archive

The Right to Education Journey: From Access to Quality

Article 21A of the Constitution, introduced by the 86th Constitutional Amendment, set out the right of children between the ages of six and fourteen to free and compulsory education. In 2009, this was operationalised by the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act. While efforts over the years have improved levels of school participation, data continue to report learning deficits among students and concerns about the quality of education and students' learning outcomes remain. Policy needs to focus on overcoming these learning deficits to create an environment where learning can take place in a meaningful way. This would require transforming schools into community institutions, decentralising their management and providing teachers with adequate training and teaching time.

CHAPTER 07

The Right to Education Journey: From Access to Quality

Anuradha De and Amarjeet Sinha

In 1993, the Supreme Court declared the right to education a fundamental right under Article 21 of the Constitution (Right to Life). Through the 86th Amendment in 2002, this right was formally incorporated into the Constitution, and the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act was passed by Parliament in 2009. In the three decades since 1993, major strides have been made in bringing children to schools. Yet a significant paradox persists: children are in school, but learning outcomes[1] remain unsatisfactory. This chapter examines this by tracing the shift from expanding access to addressing quality in elementary education since 1986.

The 42nd round of the National Sample Survey (NSS) provided a baseline on school participation, showing that large numbers of children aged six to thirteen

1 See the *Annual Status of Education Report* (ASER) report, published annually for the last ten years. See also the NAS conducted by the NCERT.

were not attending any educational institutions—around 48 per cent in rural areas and 24 per cent in urban areas. Subsequent NSS rounds on the same theme trace the trajectory of progress. The National Policy on Education, 1986 (NPE 1986) emphasised the importance of quality education and learning achievement, laying the foundation for the Minimum Levels of Learning framework in primary schools (Ministry of Human Resource Development 1986); NCERT 1991).

Article 21A
Inserted by the Constitution (Eighty-sixth Amendment) Act, 2002
The State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of six to fourteen years in such manner as the State may, by law, determine.

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009
[Enacted to give effect to Article 21A]
Every child of the age of six to fourteen years shall have the right to free and compulsory education in a neighbourhood school till the completion of his or her elementary education [...] For carrying out the provisions of this Act, the appropriate Government and the local authority shall establish, within such area or limits of neighbourhood, as may be prescribed, a school [...]
Duties of local authority include ensuring that child belonging to weaker section and the child belonging to disadvantaged group are not discriminated against and prevented from pursuing and completing elementary education on any grounds; providing infrastructure including school building, teaching staff and learning material.

The chapter is organised as follows: The first two sections discuss national initiatives in the four decades since 1986, along with budgetary allocations to expand school participation, increase attendance and improve learning outcomes and impact. Section 3 examines the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) for Universal Elementary Education (UEE) and the constitutional amendment making education a fundamental right. Section 4 covers the merger of SSA with Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) into the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (SMSA), alongside the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) and the NIPUN Bharat scheme. Section 5 concludes with an assessment of what worked, what did not and a set of recommendations for the way forward.

7.1 From independence to 1986: The initial years

India's performance in elementary education was deeply unsatisfactory in the first four decades after independence, despite significant expansion of the school system. Between 1950–51 and 1994–95, the number of primary schools

increased from 2.1 lakh to 5.2 lakh and upper primary schools from 0.13 lakh to 1.63 lakh (Ministry of Finance 1996). Quality, however, was highly uneven: many schools had only a single teacher, and large numbers of habitations had no schooling facility at all. With education initially a state subject, central government intervention was limited and conditions across states varied widely. The Constitutional Amendment of 1976 moved education from the State List to the Concurrent List, enabling the Union government to contribute more. But it was only after 1986 that the Centre began playing a substantial role in education planning and intervention. As education minister M.C. Chagla noted in his Presidential address at the Central Advisory Board of Education in 1964, Article 45 of the Constitution was being only 'partially complied with'.

> *'Our Constitution fathers did not intend that we just set up hovels, put students there, give untrained teachers, give them bad textbooks, no playgrounds and say, we have complied with Article 45 and primary education is expanding...They meant that real education should be given to our children between the ages of 6 and 14.'* (MC Chagla, Education Minister, 1964)

The NPE, formulated in 1986, stressed the need for universal enrolment in elementary education along with substantial improvements in quality. It introduced two important centrally sponsored schemes under the Five-Year Plans: the Operation Blackboard Scheme and the Non-Formal Education (NFE) Scheme. The Operation Blackboard scheme, introduced in 1987, aimed to provide all primary schools with at least two teachers and classrooms, along with teaching-learning materials (see Annexure 7.1). Additional teachers were also provided at the upper primary school level. In practice, however, many states were reluctant to recruit the second teacher, given uncertainty about their capacity to meet recurring salary costs once the ongoing Five-Year Plan period ended. While Union government support was available during the Plan period, the long-term financial liability would eventually shift to the states. Further, acute teacher shortages led to uneven allocation, and in several instances the second teacher moved to more convenient postings, undermining the purpose of the scheme (Planning Commission, 1997).

The NFE Scheme, also introduced in 1987, aimed to provide education to children unable to attend formal schools, particularly in hard-to-reach areas. These centres were mainly run by non-government organisations (NGOs), with locally contextualised teaching-learning materials and instructors paid a small honorarium. Monitoring of the scheme was weak, however, and complaints about the functioning of NFE centres were widespread. A few NGOs delivered meaningful access in remote areas; in many others, the NFE lacked credibility.

7.2 Initiatives for improvement in school participation and learning outcomes, 1987–2001

Following the launch of these two schemes, a series of concerted efforts sought to bring all children to schools and to improve learning. A significant shift came after the 1990 Education for All Global Declaration at the Jomtien Conference, which changed India's earlier policy of discouraging external aid for primary education.[2] For the first time, external funding was accepted for projects aimed at extending and improving primary education in innovative ways. These collaborations began in selected states and districts, funded by different donor agencies, without a shared framework. The first was the Andhra Pradesh Primary Education Project (APPEP), supported by Overseas Development Assistance from the UK between 1984 and 1996. APPEP focused on infrastructure, teacher development and educational management and sent educational administrators and teacher educators to UK universities in the UK to develop new skill sets in educational planning (Varghese 1998).

In 1987, the Shiksha Karmi Project (SKP) in Rajasthan sought to address schools where regular teachers were chronically absent, particularly in tribal districts[3] (Ramachandran and Sethi 2001). Working with civil society partners, SKP recruited local men and women as Shiksha Karmis and gave them an intensive forty-day residential capacity-building programme, practising every textbook lesson in depth. Opportunities for assessment, self-growth and incremental emoluments created excellence among local youth—many went on to qualify as regular teachers. This was a resource-intensive, high-quality initiative, not a low-cost substitute for teaching and its focus on the very basics of pedagogy appears to have made a material difference. SKP evolved through collaborative partnerships with a variety of actors and can be understood as an attempt to revive the joy of teaching and learning within a formal, hierarchical, delivery-oriented system of education. It contributed meaningfully to enhancing the self-esteem of those involved in educational work.

The UNICEF-supported Bihar Education Project (BEP), introduced in 1990, addressed a state that lacked even a single District Institute of Education and Training (DIET), with erstwhile Primary Teacher Training Institutions in serious decline. In the absence of teacher educators and functional DIETs, BEP developed a teacher-led capacity-building module called 'Ujala'. Accessible and engaging, the

2 According to Tilak (2008), the foreign aid component as a share of central government expenditure increased from 5 per cent in 1993–94 to 20 per cent in 2001–02.

3 The first two phases were supported by SIDA, which withdrew support in 1998 following the nuclear tests conducted by the Government of India. DFID supported the third phase until 2005 (Ramachandran and Sethi 2001).

module contributed especially to effective mathematics teaching in government schools.[4] The spark that Ujala lit, however, was eventually extinguished by the structural problems it could not overcome: understaffed and dilapidated schools that communities associated more with election booths than with learning. Through BEP, an effort was also made in Ranchi district to establish Bihar's first DIET at Ratu, staffed by outstanding retired faculty from the Netarhat School.[5] National talent-scouting brought capable educators from all over the country to make the centre a genuinely vibrant institution.

Other externally aided projects in this period included the Education for All Project in Uttar Pradesh (1991) and the Lok Jumbish in Rajasthan (1992). Uttar Pradesh's project focused on basic school infrastructure and innovative teaching-learning materials; Lok Jumbish, with its emphasis on civil society partnerships and out-of-the-box innovations, demonstrated particular success in tribal districts. Despite these achievements, both remained experiments that were not absorbed into the mainstream. The inertia of the system continued to reign supreme (Varghese 1998).

These dispersed projects converged in 1994 into the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), a large national umbrella programme for all externally aided primary education initiatives (De and Endow 2008). The shift from state-level interventions to centrally sponsored schemes was deliberate: evaluations of earlier schemes had shown that disaggregated target-setting and microplanning were essential to address regional and social disparities. States were too large and varied to serve as homogeneous planning units and state-level interventions could not ensure that funds reached backward districts. Selected districts in selected states were therefore taken up under DPEP for the transformation of primary education.[6] DPEP introduced new paradigms for district planning, infrastructure design, pedagogy, learning support for children with disabilities, innovations in teaching-learning processes and technology-enabled monitoring through the District Information System of Education (DISE).

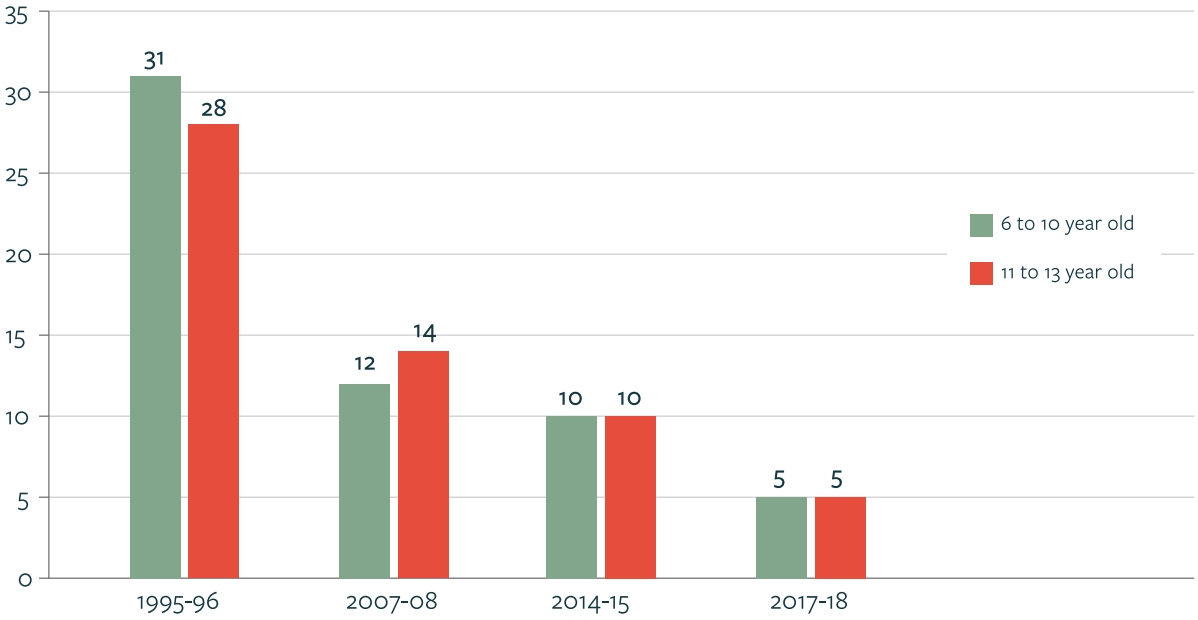
Every district team underwent a five-day comprehensive training. National resource organisations such as National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA) and the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) were mobilised and Joint Review Missions conducted by Government of India nominees and donor agency representatives monitored and evaluated implementation. Resources for improved infrastructure, teaching aids, free textbooks, teacher in-service training and School Management Committee (SMC)

4 This evolved into a long-term initiative and continues to date.

5 A residential school of excellence that inspired the Navodaya Vidyalaya model.

6 This programme began with forty-two districts in 1994 and expanded to eighty districts in 1996.

Figure 7.1: Proportion of children not attending school



Sources and notes: NSSO Relevant Rounds

training began reaching schools. The scale of the problem was now better understood and centre-state-district partnerships began to strengthen.

Despite these efforts, the NSSO survey of 1995–96 showed that at the national level the situation remained bleak. 31 per cent of six- to ten-year-olds and 28 per cent of eleven- to thirteen-year-olds were still not attending school (Figure 7.1). Rural-urban differences were large, between 18 and 20 percentage points and among rural girls, more than 40 per cent were still out of school.

7.3 Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) for Universal Elementary Education, 2001–2017

The constitutional amendment to make education a fundamental right for children aged six to fourteen came through the 86th Amendment in 2002, building on the 1993 Unnikrishnan judgment[7] and the subsequent Satyapal Anand case.[8] The age group under six remained within the Directive Principles of State Policy.

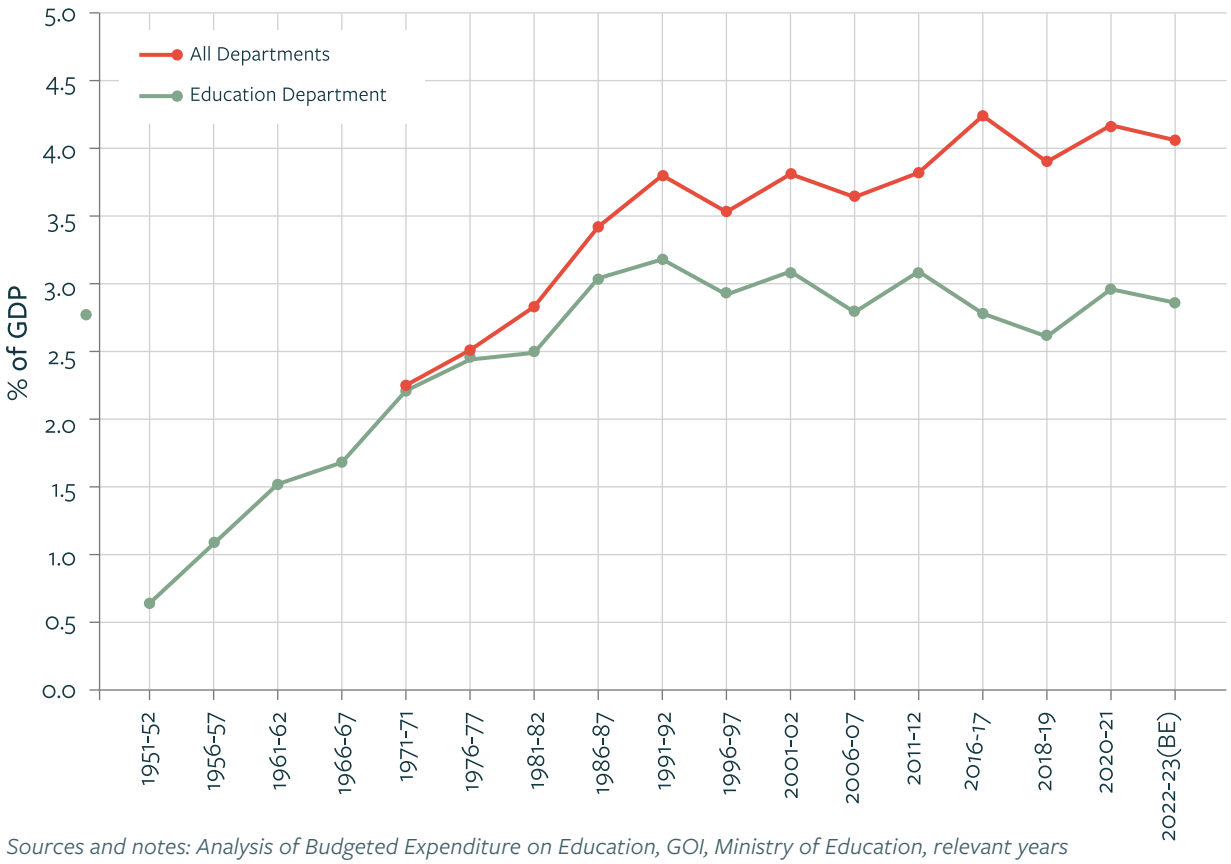
The resource requirement for universalisation of elementary education was estimated by several committees, though actual allocations consistently fell short. The Kothari Commission (1968) recommended an allocation of 6 per cent of GDP to education, a recommendation reiterated in NPE 1986 and NEP 2020. The Muhiram Saikia Committee of Education Ministers (1997)[9] and the Tapas Majumdar Committee (1999) were specifically set up to estimate the additional resources

7 Unni Krishnan, J. P. v. State of Andhra Pradesh https://indiankanoon.org/doc/1775396/

8 Satya Pal Anand v. State of Gujarat https://indiankanoon.org/doc/1682420/

9 The estimated number of out-of-school children was 80 million in 1997 and the additional resource requirement was ₹40,000 crore over five years.

Figure 7.2: Public expenditure on education as % of GDP



Sources and notes: Analysis of Budgeted Expenditure on Education, GOI, Ministry of Education, relevant years
BE = Budget Estimates.

needed to make UEE (Classes 1–8) a fundamental right. The Tapas Majumdar Committee estimated that an additional ₹1,36,823 crore would be required over ten years for achieving the same. With the Ministry of Finance being unsure about how to raise these resources, a committee of education ministers under Murli Manohar Joshi was subsequently appointed to rework the figure within the 'pragmatic realm of the possible' (Ministry of Human Resource Development 1999). The RTE Act, passed in 2009, did not include a specific financial memorandum.

Public expenditure on education has increased in absolute terms over time, but has not kept pace with GDP. Between the early 1990s and the mid-2010s, total government expenditure on education[10] fluctuated between 3.5 and 4.5 per cent of GDP (Figure 7.2). The target of 6 per cent of GDP, recommended by the Kothari Commission in 1968 and reaffirmed by two successive national education policies, has never been achieved.

India's first UEE Programme, the SSA, was launched in 2001–2002 as 'a comprehensive and integrated flagship programme of Government of India to attain UEE, covering the entire country in a mission mode' (Ministry of Human Resource Development 2004). SSA brought earlier initiatives such as DPEP, Lok Jumbish and

10 These include the Ministry of Science and Technology, the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, the Ministry of Tribal Welfare and the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment

Operation Blackboard under a single umbrella and made a comprehensive attempt to address supply-side deficits, with an additional ₹60,000 crore allocated over a ten-year period.

SSA was jointly funded by the Union government, state governments and three donor agencies.[11] It focused on universalising elementary education up to Class 8 (not merely the primary cycle up to Class 5) and was implemented across all districts in India. The programme envisaged major changes in access, quality, planning and monitoring. Expansion of schooling infrastructure was central to this effort, alongside significant improvements in facilities such as drinking water, toilets, ramps, playgrounds and boundary walls. Its impact was seen through the decrease in the number of out-of-school children Menezes (2015). Progress in quality, however, was far less visible. Interventions in textbooks, teacher recruitment, and in-service training produced very limited change in curriculum and classroom practice. A mid-term assessment in 2005–06 increased the focus on outcome indicators such as retention, dropout rates, and student achievement, but failed to produce any major impact.

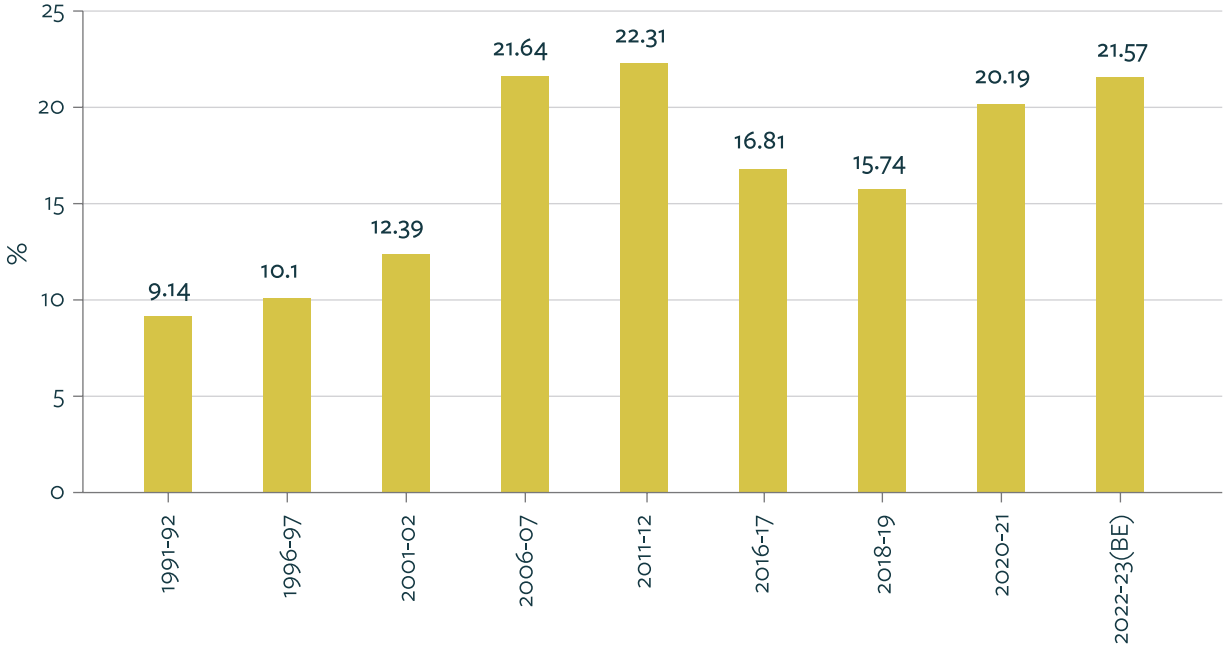
A range of surveys, like ASER 2006 and National Achievement Survey (NAS) 2012, revealed slow progress in learning achievement. ASER reports documented low proficiency in literacy and numeracy skills. NAS showed that learning levels among Class 5 students improved by only two percentage points between 2002 and 2008.[12] The 2012 JRM report highlighted particularly concerning findings on equity: students with special needs and those from scheduled caste, scheduled tribe, and other backward classes scored significantly lower in achievement tests than students from the general category. Children with physical disabilities also performed substantially below the rest (RMSA 2013).

After 2012, SSA norms were revised to align with the RTE Act, but the central share of funding was simultaneously reduced, with states taking on greater responsibility. The Centre's share of total education expenditure declined steadily from 22.31 per cent in 2011–12 to 16.81 per cent in 2016–17 (Figure 7.3). Since Union government resources had been the primary vehicle for infrastructure expansion and pedagogical innovation, this decline in the central share carries real consequences. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the central share has risen again, though it remains to be seen whether this trend will be sustained.

11 The World Bank, the Department for International Development (UK) and the European Union.

12 Achievement Survey. New Delhi: Department of School Education and Literacy, Government of India. https://www.educationforallinindia.com/Achievement_survey.pdf

Figure 7.3: Centre's share in total government expenditure on education (%) (only Education Department)



Sources and notes: Analysis of Budgeted Expenditure on Education, relevant years. BE = Budget Estimates

7.4 Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (SMSA) and NIPUN Bharat, 2018 onwards

In 2018, the three major central schemes—SSA, RMSA and Teacher Education were merged into the SMSA. This new scheme aims to provide integrated, holistic school education, from the pre-school to the higher secondary level.[13] It shifted strategic emphasis from access to whole- school experience, with particular focus on model higher secondary schools such as Navodaya Vidyalayas,[14] Kendriya Vidyalayas[15] and PM Shri Schools.[16]

Improvement in foundational learning outcomes has become a major policy focus through the NIPUN Bharat initiative. This aligns closely with the NEP 2020, which identified Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) as the highest priority area in school education. As the NEP states, 'The ability to read and write, and perform basic operations with numbers, is a necessary foundation and an indispensable prerequisite for all future schooling and lifelong learning. However, various governmental, as well as non-governmental surveys, indicate that we are currently in a learning crisis: a large proportion of students currently in elementary school - estimated to be over 5 crore in number - have not attained foundational literacy and numeracy, i.e., the ability to read and comprehend basic text and the ability to carry out basic addition and subtraction with Indian numerals' (Ministry of Education

13 https://dsel.education.gov.in/sites/default/files/2021-12/samagra_shiksha.pdf

14 Caters to talented students primarily from rural and socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

15 Caters to children of transferable central government employees.

16 Schools selected as exemplar institutions to showcase NEP implementation.

2020, 8). Government and non-governmental surveys alike indicate that over five crore children in elementary schools currently lack these foundational capabilities.

NIPUN Bharat focuses on competency-based education using clear learning outcome milestones, teacher training delivered through online modules, and a strong assessment and monitoring framework. It involves changes in curriculum, use of technology, and community involvement.[17] The National Achievement Surveys that preceded it have been replaced by the PARAKH Rashtriya Sarvekshan, first conducted in 2024. PARAKH assesses students in Classes 3, 5, 8, and 10 across government, government-aided, and private unaided schools, using tools designed to capture learning competencies rather than content-based recall. PARAKH (2024) shows some improvement in FLN compared to 2021, particularly in rural areas, though learning levels remain below pre-pandemic levels. A full picture of NIPUN Bharat's effectiveness will depend on the next round of PARAKH.

'The ability to read and write, and perform basic operations with numbers, is a necessary foundation and an indispensable prerequisite for all future schooling and lifelong learning. However, various governmental, as well as non-governmental surveys, indicate that we are currently in a learning crisis: a large proportion of students currently in elementary school - estimated to be over 5 crore in number - have not attained foundational literacy and numeracy, i.e., the ability to read and comprehend basic text and the ability to carry out basic addition and subtraction with Indian numerals'
(Ministry of Education 2020, 8).

Earlier concerns about assessment tools were discovered in relation to large-scale achievement surveys in DPEP states. These tended to measure only cognitive outcomes, namely the acquisition of knowledge and skills, while neglecting creativity, critical thinking, and values (Azim Premji Foundation 2004). Large-scale and qualitative studies also frequently produced divergent results, calling into question the efficacy of the tools used. NIPUN Bharat's competency-based assessment framework is, in part, a response to these long-standing concerns.

Evidence on NIPUN implementation is beginning to emerge. Sarkar and Gaur (2025), drawing on qualitative case studies in Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and Assam, reveal a complex picture. Uttar Pradesh adopted a centralised model with standardised teacher training and fixed school resources; Tamil Nadu used a decentralised, context-specific approach built

17 https://www.dsel-education.gov.in/static/uploads/2025/12/db57d121e554cc4882ed31a4c856dd77.pdf

on activity-based learning and (SMC) monitoring. Assam showed patchy implementation owing to resource constraints, teacher shortages and linguistic diversity, through local innovations—bilingual story cards, outdoor teaching strategies—were supported by some NGOs. The decentralised model proved most effective, underscoring the importance of contextual flexibility. The study also establishes that NIPUN cannot be implemented in isolation: adequate teachers, infrastructure and local monitoring are preconditions for success.

ASER (2025) and Jhingran (2025) provide further insights into how civil society partnerships under NIPUN Bharat have worked well in improving foundational learning particularly where organisations have provided sustained hand-holding support. Jhingran (2025) argues persuasively for continuous, sustained partnerships with civil society organisations as a necessary condition for effective foundational-stage interventions.

7.5 Improving learning levels: The way forward

The central question is not simply how to assess learning outcomes better, but why strategies aimed at improving them have consistently fallen short. The principal gaps lie in community connect, decentralised financing, governance and teacher development. Addressing these requires a shift from supply-side provisioning to a framework that treats schools as accountable community institutions.

The first priority is improving access and strengthening school management. Every school requires an adequate number of teachers, achieved through rationalisation of postings combined with new appointments. Teachers must possess the required subject competencies; systems of support and accountability are needed where these are lacking. A performance-based system of incremental, respectable compensation should be developed. School management needs support to ensure sufficient time for teaching and learning. No teacher should be assigned non-teaching duties during school hours; under no circumstances should such duties disrupt learning through school closure. A minimum of 250 working days must be ensured per year. Responsibility for mid-day meals should, where feasible, be transferred to women self-help groups with panchayat or school management committee oversight, freeing teachers from logistical duties, as Tamil Nadu has demonstrated.

Secondly, the management of the school system requires greater autonomy and decision-making authority at the school level, as well as block and district levels. Decentralised management of schools with community connect is important. To this effect, parent-community connect can make schools community institutions that build on experiential learning. Quarterly Parents Teachers Association meetings to share progress of children and monthly sports and cultural events in schools would aid in this process.

From NPE 1986 to NEP 2020

1986
National Policy on Education
Emphasised the importance of quality education and learning achievement

1987
Operation Blackboard
Aimed to provide all primary schools with at least two teachers and classrooms, along with teaching-learning materials

Non-Formal Education Scheme
Aimed to provide education to children unable to attend formal schools, particularly in hard-to-reach areas

1990
World Declaration on Education for All (Jomtien)
Brought a shift in India's earlier policy towards external aid for primary education. External funding accepted for improving primary education

1994
District Primary Education Programme (DPEP)
Brought dispersed regional programmes into a large national umbrella programme for all externally aided primary education initiatives

2001-02
Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan
Programme to attain Universal Elementary Education

2002
86th Amendment of the Constitution
Introduced Article 21A providing for free and compulsory education to all children of the age of six to fourteen years

2009
Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act
Operationalises Article 21A

2018
Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan
Provision of integrated, holistic school education, from the pre-school to the higher secondary level

2020
National Education Policy
Increased focus on Foundational Literacy and Numeracy

Mr.Bhavani/July,49,A31mLadakhi School Boys. Public Resource via Internet Archive

Given India's social, economic and linguistic diversity, strategies must be context-specific, with flexibility in teaching and resource management. Panchayats should be made directly responsible for schools and anganwadis. Funds, functions and functionaries under the charge of local governments and women's collectives is likely to improve teacher accountability and learning outcomes, as in Kerala. They could ensure that all children have access to teaching-learning materials and technology-enabled learning opportunities through tablets, phones and sound boxes. They could also be authorised to address teacher vacancies on an interim basis by engaging Teacher Eligibility Test (TET)-qualified candidates until regular appointments are made, drawing on the zero vacancy policy followed in Kendriya Vidyalayas. Additionally, local governments could converge initiatives for social development to take care of the inter sectoral challenges and address wider social determinants of school effectiveness.

Decentralised school leadership, backed by adequate budgetary resources through panchayats, is critical for improving school quality. Educational administrators at block and district levels are frequently transferred, disrupting school functioning; longer tenures with clear deliverables are therefore necessary. Under SSA, a provision of 6 per cent for management costs allowed professional programme managers, pedagogy experts and finance and planning specialists to be brought in. This provision should be reinstated.

Thirdly, the focus should be on learning outcomes and teacher development. Teacher development requires vibrant institutions of excellence at every level. Even the TET has not adequately addressed the challenge of recruiting capable, resident teachers. Technology offers a significant opportunity here: a diligent and dedicated teacher, not necessarily outstanding, who opens the world of knowledge and skills to children through equitable access to e-learning and peer group learning, may be as valuable as a formally highly qualified one.

Practical steps include training all teachers in the use of online materials as a supplement to classroom teaching; organising periodic teacher assessments so that those unable to teach can be identified and removed from the system after multiple supported opportunities; and prioritising professional partnerships at cluster,[18] block and district levels to build teacher excellence. Multi-medium blended learning should be the norm in all schools.

Along with periodic large-scale surveys, there is an urgent need for intensive small-scale qualitative studies on all aspects of the teaching-learning process. Such work can illuminate how children from diverse backgrounds learn in varied contexts and how pedagogical practices can improve outcomes. Measuring outcomes in a non-threatening and community-owned way will foster a culture of excellence rather than compliance.

18 Under each block, groups of schools are organised into clusters, primarily for administrative support and resource sharing.

7.6 Conclusion

The failure of children to learn is a national emergency. As a country, India is at risk of growing old before it becomes rich if this challenge is not addressed with urgency. The constitutional amendment making elementary education a fundamental right, the placement of education in the Concurrent list, and over two decades of experience with the SSA demonstrate that Union, state and local governments must work together to ensure basic minimum learning conditions for children up to the age of fourteen. Between 2019–20 and 2025–26, the share of the SMSA in the Department of School Education and Literacy budget declined from 62 per cent to 51 per cent (Kundu 2025). This trend must be reversed. The Centre and states should agree to contribute to education on a 50:50 basis for at least the next ten years, with convergence at the gram panchayat and urban local body levels.

UEE must address the reality that many children have reached Class 3 without foundational literacy and numeracy, without which learning deficits will continue to persist. Pre-school plays a critical role in long-term learning outcomes. Under NEP 2020, three years of pre-school and Classes 1 and 2 have been integrated into a foundational learning and development stage. Anganwadi centres can share responsibility for pre-school children, provided their teachers are adequately trained for better learning. This requires urgent attention, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds who depend on government schools and anganwadi centres. Assessment must go beyond cognitive measurement. Creativity, critical thinking and values cannot be left outside the frame. A regularised, systematic and periodic review of children's learning at different stages—across the country—is needed, using tools that capture what children actually understand, not merely what they can recall. Large-scale surveys must be complemented by intensive qualitative studies that illuminate how children learn in diverse contexts and how pedagogical practices can improve learning outcomes.

SSA, the RTE Act and the initiatives described in this chapter have succeeded in bringing children to schools and creating learning opportunities. The task now is to ensure they learn. This requires investing in schools as community institutions: adequate physical infrastructure, trained teachers in every school and across every class, and an enabling finance and governance environment for learning to take place. Effective decentralisation, with real power, participation and accountability at the local level, particularly for panchayats and urban local bodies, is not optional but the precondition. India must therefore move up the skilling ladder, with basic education as its foundation. All political parties committed to democracy should adopt this as a citizen's agenda, recognising the imminent demand for better human development opportunities among the poor. Education, in this context, makes the difference between poverty and prosperity, inequality and inclusivity, deprivation and well-being.

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