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The Crisis in India's Primary Education

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Summary

Findings of the 2018 Annual Status of Education Report highlight the crisis confronting primary education in India. The poor results raise serious concerns about the preparedness of India's youth for subsequent education and the workplace. Why are India's children not learning despite spending years in school? What measures can be undertaken to address the huge learning gap?

Introduction

The 13th Annual Status of Education Report (ASER 2018) released in 2019 assessed the state of primary and secondary education in India. Following the Beyond Basics survey in ASER 2017, which evaluated the preparedness of 14-18 year olds for the work force, ASER 2018, once again, focuses on schooling status of children between the ages of 3 to 16, and basic reading and arithmetic skills of children in the 5 to 16 age group across rural India.

Pratham and ASER

Established in 1995 to provide education to children in Mumbai's slums, Pratham has grown into the pre-eminent non-government entity in India, designing and implementing high-quality, affordable interventions aimed at improving the quality of education in India. The ASER Centre was established in 2008 as an autonomous research and assessment division within the Pratham network. ASER and Pratham findings are quoted by multilaterals, including the World Bank and the United Nations, policymakers, government responses to queries raised in the Indian Parliament, and researchers to report of the state of primary and secondary education in India. The template developed is being deployed by a growing number of countries as they seek to assess the state of school education.

ASER 2018

The 2018 ASER collected data from 596 district by surveying 546,527 students from 354,944 homes in 15,988 schools across all the states of India. Facilitated by Pratham, the one-on-one assessment with each child covers basic reading and arithmetic for all school kids (age 5-16). The surveys are carried out by volunteers from district-level organizations and institutions. These include colleges, universities, non-government organisations, teacher training institutions, as well as 236 District Institutes of Education and Training. Each child is assigned the same tasks, with several assessors visiting at least one government school and 20 randomly selected households in each village. All children in the household in the 3-16 age group are surveyed, while all children aged 5-16 in that household are assessed.

Since the implementation of the Right to Education Act (RTE) in 2009, school visits by ASER include indicators of compliance with norms and standards specified in the RTE Act that are easy to measure, including improvements to infrastructure, in school buildings, access to schools (one kilometre for children in primary school (Class I-V)) and three kilometre walking distance for upper primary school (Class VI-VIII), and the availability of sports facilities.

ASER Findings

The 2018 review offers some encouraging results, though the disconcerting underlying trends of poor learning in schools persist. The RTE Act has helped draw children to school. By 2018, over 97 per cent of children of primary school age in India were enrolled, with improvements amongst young girls and boys and older children. Free school lunches enable millions of pupils who otherwise may be too hungry to learn, to attend school. The construction of separate 'usable' girl's toilets has helped retain girls at school.[1] According to the ASER report, nearly two-thirds of all girls' schools in rural India now have 'usable' toilets. Furthermore, several states have provided girls with free bicycles to ease the convenience of attending schools.

For the first time in the decade since the introduction of the RTE Act, ASER found tangible, albeit, marginal improvements, in learning levels, especially among students of Class 3 and Class 5. More than half (50.5 per cent) of children in Class 5 could read a Class 2 textbook, up from 46.9 per cent in 2012. The proportion of children in Class 5 who could do simple division increased from 24.9 per cent in 2012 to 27.9 per cent in 2018. The reading levels of students in Class 3, which was assessed by the ability to read Class 2 textbooks was inching up since the low of 2010 (19.5 per cent), and now stands at 27.2 per cent. The improvements are uneven across states, driven by significant progress in some states, while several other states have regressed. The ASER results reveal two distinct trends between 2005 and2014.[2] First, learning levels were low and slow to change until 2010, followed by a slight decline till 2014. This decline in learning levels in primary education observed in government schools seems to have stabilised with a marginal improvement in learning standards since 2014. Secondly enrolment in private school that was increasing steadily over several years has plateaued since 2016.

High Dropout Rates

Despite improvements in enrolment, retaining children in school through graduation remains a challenge. Up to 29 per cent of children across the country drop out before completing five years of primary school, and 43 per cent before finishing upper primary school. Only 42 per cent of children complete high school placing India among the top five nations for out-of-school children of primary school age dropping out of school.

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1 Pratham has been counting 'usable' toilets for girls in schools. While access to 'usable' toilets may seem odd to the reader unfamiliar with conditions in India, and indeed many other developing countries, the availability of such toilets in schools offers convenience, dignity and security and is a significant determinant of school attendance by girls.

2 'Equity in Learning', Wilima Wadhwa, Director ASER, 2019.

The poor learning outcomes and the high dropout rates highlight the deep-rooted and continuing crisis in Indian education. By Class 8, the last year of compulsory schooling in India, all children are expected to have mastered foundational skills. However, one out of every four Class 8 students in rural India is unable to read even a Class 2 text, and every second Class 8 student cannot solve a problem that involves basic division. Students learn little from year to year, but early learning deficits are magnified among those who continue in school.

Children in India complete 10.2 years of pre-primary, primary and secondary school by the age of 18. However, when years of schooling are adjusted for quality of learning, this is equivalent to only 5.8 years: a learning gap of 4.4 years.[3]

Private Schools

The poor learning standards in government schools plagued by inadequate infrastructure, lack of trained faculty, and misappropriation of funds.[4] The desire for children to learn English has induced parents to switch to private schools that are often bilingual. In the five years to 2017, enrolment in private schools increased by 17 million, while it fell by 13 million in government schools.

Students at private schools tend to fare better than their cohorts in government schools, because of differences in economic status and the family's education background. The learning deficit though narrower in private schools, is pervasive across the schooling system. A granular picture[5] indicates that the gap appears to have stabilised since 2016.

International Comparison of Learning

While direct international comparisons are hard to come by, relative standards point to poor standards of learning relative to their peers in other countries. India has failed its children[6]. "Half of ten-year-old Indians cannot read a paragraph meant for seven-year-olds. At 15, pupils in Tamil Nadu and Himachal Pradesh are five years behind their peers in Shanghai.[7] The average 15-year-old from these states would be in the bottom two per cent of an American class. India has a youth bulge: 13 per cent of its inhabitants are teenagers, compared with eight per cent in China and seven per cent in Europe". However, with schooling in the current state, the demographic dividend will be squandered.[8] The problem is not confined to India alone. The 2018 World Development Report states that, despite a near global trend towards higher enrolment, schooling without learning across the developing world is pervasive. The gap in India is particularly wide.

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3 'Huma Capital Index', World Bank, 2018.

4 'Demand for private schools rise, even in rural India', Centre for Civil Society, https://www.ccsindia.org/demand-private-schools-rise-even-rural-india.

5 Wadhwa, Ibid.

6 'India has made primary education universal, but not good - Wasting Indian minds' The Economist, 18 April 2018, https://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21723105-worlds-biggest-school-system-also-one-worst-india-has-made-primary-education.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

Reasons for Poor Learning Outcomes

Neglect of Primary Education

The reasons are manifold. In the quest for a modern economy, India has prioritised higher institutions of learning over primary and secondary education. The emphasis has been on training engineers, doctors and technical experts, with little attention paid to schools and even less resources committed to primary education. While a small number of urban primary and secondary schools and a small cohort of government schools under the jurisdiction of the Union Government offer sound schooling, education in the rural areas where most of the country lives, is neglected.

Compared to the nations of East and Southeast Asia, India commits a very small quantum of resources to schools, spending about 2.7 per cent of gross domestic product on schools. Though the commitment to primary schooling has increased in recent years, with an increase in funding by about 80 per cent over 2011-15,[9] it is a small proportion of total expenditure on education. The problem however does not stem from the paucity of funding.

The RTE Act focuses on input requirements for schools while largely ignoring the question of how these inputs translate into actual learning. Metrics assessing learning show an alarming deterioration. Emphasis on inputs to the neglect of the production process and the final output (learning). India is a case of schooling without learning.

Poor learning outcomes reflected in the low returns to education, reduces incentives for poor parents to send their children to school. These perceptions are also shaped by the poor conditions of school buildings, absenteeism among teachers and a pervasive shortage of teachers.

Prior Preparation

Children from weak socio-economic groups are at a serious disadvantage from the very beginning. Opportunities to learn at home are severely constrained when the parents have not had the benefit of schooling, with few resources to strengthen let alone supplement learning outside home. Children from such groups tend to be poorly prepared for school, reinforcing the importance of pre-school preparation to help bridge gaps in the potential for learning. This assumes importance as a large segment of the population hovers around the poverty line and there is no system of identifying or helping children who are not making adequate progress in the early grades. Over the longer term, the consequence is slow economic mobility.

Ineffective Teachers

The quality of teaching is extremely poor. Since 2011, when the government introduced a test for aspiring teachers, as many as 99 per cent of applicants failed each year.[10] Despite

[9] Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan.
[10] Economist, 8 April 2018, Ibid.

substantial pay increases, strong teachers' unions resist accountability. Nearly a quarter of teachers may be absent on any particular day[11]. Budgetary cuts compounded by mismanagement of resources has resulted in a severe shortage of teachers (nearly 689,000 in primary schools). In many rural schools, poorly qualified teachers continue to impart rote learning, with little learning on the part of students.

Curriculum: Teaching at the Right Level

The massive increase in enrolment due to the RTE, especially of children who are poorly prepared for school entry classes, coupled with poor teaching methods not only impairs prospects for learning but also results in massive variations in learning levels. The most diligent of teachers face challenges in such contexts. In a Class 3 class, there are children at Class 2 level, some at Class 1 level, and some who are like pre-schoolers in terms of their literacy and numeracy levels. These variations in capabilities pose serious challenges for teachers. Teachers are expected to complete the syllabus within a given time period – but with absenteeism amongst both teachers and students, learning becomes even more challenging. Furthermore, "the distance between the expectations of the curriculum and where children currently are is also massive. The usual teaching-learning approach used in most Indian classrooms is to teach by rote from the grade level textbook and focus on 'teaching to the top of the class'."[12]

Health

The incidence of stunting (38.7 per cent of children are too short compared to the average height of children in its cohort) or wasting (15.1 per cent of children weighing too little compared to their cohorts) is among the highest in the world. Children suffering from stunting suffer from impairment of intellectual abilities that continue through life. Nutritional deficiencies severely impair a child's ability to develop cognitive skills. Deprivation in the early years, till the age of five, is likely to leave a child permanently impaired with poor cognitive skills, limiting prospects for improvements, even when resources for an improved nutritious diet are available.

Why Should We Be Concerned About Quality of Education?

The quality of learning bears directly on India's future workforce, its competitiveness and prospects for growth. India's demographic dividend depends on the learning levels of students. Indians born today are likely to be just 44 per cent productive as workers, way below their Asian peers[13] "Factoring in what children actually learn, expected years of school is only 5.8 years, effectively putting into question the impact of the RTE Act that promises eight years of compulsory education to all Indians."[14] With some 240 million students or nearly 20 per cent of the Indian population in school, their quality of learning or lack of it assumes significance for the competitiveness of the country. It has an impact on efficiency at

[11] https://www.economist.com/leaders/2017/06/08/india-has-made-primary-education-universal-but-not-good.

[12] Rukmini Bannerji "Behind the Headlines", ASER (Rural) 2018, released on January 2019.

[13] 'Human Capital Index', World Bank, 2018.

[14] World Bank, 2018, Ibid.

the workplace, on labour productivity, prospects for growth and eventually on the quality of life.

The learning crisis amplifies inequality, hobbling disadvantaged youth who most need the boost that a good education can offer. Perhaps more than any other time in recent history children today need to develop stronger cognitive and non-cognitive skills to eventually participate in the labour force of the 21st century. This has consequences for skills development, which in turn deters investment and prospects for growth, especially at a time when skills development is an essential prerequisite for the knowledge economy. Else they face the uncertain prospects of a working life in the informal sector, and, for the country, uncertain growth. A class of poorly educated children will be ill-equipped to acquire the skills needed to deal with forthcoming changes as the fourth Industrial Revolution. This impairs prospects for economic mobility and risks creating a permanent underclass with reduced prospects for intergenerational mobility.

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