



An overview of India's primary school education policies and outcomes 2005–2011



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ABSTRACT

Universal school enrolment of children aged 6–14 years has been a commitment enshrined in the Indian constitution since 1950. To attain this goal, the central government has set up a range of programs, such as incentive programs, teacher grants and infrastructure grants, while state governments share responsibility in implementing those educational policy initiatives. This paper reviews the progress of India's primary schools over the period 2005–2011 as public educational undertaking shifted more from the centre to the states. Using two waves of the Indian Human Development Survey conducted in 2005 and 2011, we track the progress of primary schools in terms of infrastructure upgrade, teachers' quality, the costs of education, enrolment and learning outcomes. We find that while progress has been made in terms of infrastructure provision and enrolment, other aspects have either seen no progress or have worsened over time, and numerical and reading skills of children 8–11 years old worsening over time. Better performing states are generally in the South and in the extreme North. However, in terms of learning outcomes, the abysmal results are nationwide.

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1. Introduction

There is a considerable literature on schooling and education in India that mostly focuses on enrolment, dropout, and incentive programs such as mid-day meals. The attention devoted to this area underscores the importance of these issues in India. Das (2007) points out that while the dropout rate has decreased in India between 1960 and 2004, the proportion of dropout is still quite high. One probable reason behind this could be that low-income families withdraw their children from school and get them to work to contribute to household income (Chamarbagwala, 2008). Das (2007) emphasised that school enrolment alone is not a sufficient indicator of educational outcomes unless a standard educational attainment measure is used concurrently. Actual school going, performance of the students relative to expectation, school level infrastructure and the quality of teachers should also be considered, rather than the sole consideration of enrolment. The current paper aims to address a range of school level input

and output measures to explore the current state of primary school achievements in India.

As Kingdon (2007) puts it, "India has 22% of the world's population, 46% of the illiterate people in the world, and a substantial proportion of the global out-of-school children and youth population, with youth and adult literacy rates lagging behind most other developing countries, surpassing only Sub-Saharan Africa". A seminal paper by Psacharopoulos and Patrinos (2004) looked at social and private returns to education across the globe and found evidence of substantial returns on schooling, with higher rates of returns estimated at lower educational levels and in developing regions. Further, higher levels of education in India are correlated with higher levels of per capita incomes and economic growth (Trivedi, 2006). There is, hence, considerable scope for designing primary school education policies aimed at increasing human capital in India which has great potential to produce economic returns for both the individual and the country.

Since the 1950s, India has implemented numerous policies at both the federal and state levels targeted at improving educational outcomes, particularly for primary school aged children (Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2010). However, there is a lack of studies looking at the change in school resources in terms of physical infrastructure and teacher quality over the last decade. Existing

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Indian studies, such as Parikh, Fu, Parikh, McRobie, and George (2015), tend to examine infrastructure provision outside of schools, although positive effects to educational outcomes from such infrastructure provision has also been clearly demonstrated. This paper aims to fill this gap by looking at the changes in school resources and learning outcomes for primary school-aged children over the past decade.

This study is purely descriptive in nature and does not intend to prove causality or demonstrate correlation between school resources and educational outcomes of the students. This paper, first and foremost, positions itself in the literature on primary education in India by mainly tracing out the path of progress in terms of educational inputs and outputs against the backdrop of changing national policies on education in the last decade. Between 2005 and 2011, the responsibility for elementary educational undertakings shifted from the central government to the state governments and this period in-between represents the window where the SSA policy was enacted and eventually reinforced with the RTE Act of 2009. We use the 2005 and 2011 waves of the nationally representative Indian Human Development Survey to analyse the national performance and to compare the state-specific achievements, before and after the shift in centre-state responsibilities. Specifically, we examine the levels of primary school infrastructure, incentive programs, and educational outcomes as measured by enrolment (conventionally used in the literature; see, for example, Afridi, 2011; Dostie & Jayaraman, 2006) but, also, more importantly, by learning outcomes relative to the expected standard of learning at age specific levels.

Our findings show that progress is mixed. While enrolment numbers have improved, students' attendance on an average day has worsened over time. Similar enrolment rates were observed by gender, caste, and geographic location (rural/urban) for schoolchildren less than 15 years old, but, from this age onwards, important disparities start to emerge. A large number of students perform below the expected age-specific level of reading, writing and mathematics competency as set by the National Council of Education Research and Training (NCERT, 2005) primary education curriculum. While provision of school infrastructure has sharply increased, their actual usability can be limited. For instance, several toilets were found to be kept locked. Furthermore, many schools do not have electricity despite having been connected to the network. Moreover, wide disparities in levels of infrastructure provision remain among the states.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 outlines a brief historical overview of India's education policies. Data and methodology are described in section 3 followed by the results in section 4. Section 5 discusses and summarizes our key findings on the investment into and resultant achievements of primary schooling in India. Section 6 concludes.

2. An overview of India's educational policies

India's commitment towards universally free and compulsory education for children aged up to 14 years old began post-independence, as stated in the Constitution in 1950 (article 45). However, while some improvement in enrolment was achieved, this goal remained largely unfulfilled and low enrolment rates in schools was a major concern of policy makers in the second half of the 20th century.

This disquiet over low enrolment rates paved the way to the establishment of the National Policy on Education 1986 by the Indira Gandhi government (revised 1992 by the Rajiv Gandhi government). The National Policy on Education (NPE) was a major landmark since it established India's central government as the driver in the development and implementation of policy measures

aimed at achieving universal elementary education (Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2010). Under this policy, three aspects of elementary education were targeted:

1. Universal access and enrolment,
2. Universal retention of children up to 14 years of age, and
3. Substantial improvement in the quality of education to enable all children to achieve essential levels of learning.

Since then, policy makers have recognized that school enrolment rates do not fully reflect actual school participation rates and that school participation and attendance are important in influencing actual academic performance (Afridi, 2011). A major reason behind low enrolment rates and high dropouts in village schools has been attributed to the high opportunity cost of sending children to school when this time could be spent on contributing to farm or house work. This gave rise to policies such as the mid-day meals program that offered immediate incentives to attend school for children from lower income families (Afridi, 2011). The mid-day meals program has since been recognised to be quite successful in increasing attendance rates, particularly for girls (Afridi, 2011; Dreze & Kingdon, 2001).

In 2001, the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA; Education for All Movement) programme was launched, to further the aims of achieving universal elementary education. The SSA programme set out explicit aims to be achieved under a clear timeframe, including the completion of at least five years of primary schooling by all children by 2007, the completion of elementary schooling by all children by 2010, universal retention of children in the education system by 2010, and the bridging of gender and social caste gaps at the primary school stage by 2007, and at the elementary education stage by 2010 (Das, 2007).

Since the implementation of the SSA programme, several measures have been rolled out across India's elementary education system, albeit not uniformly. These measures include increasing school resources, such as number of teachers, classrooms, and teaching/learning equipment. It also aims to improve teachers' qualification and professionalism by providing training opportunities and improving school supervision. Girls, as a disadvantaged group, are given special attention via programs such as Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas¹ (Gol, 2010). Additional funding was also made available for teacher training and for schools for children with special needs. The aims of the SSA programme were further preserved in legislation, namely, the Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009 (RTE). The main objective of the RTE Act was to provide free and compulsory education to all children between the ages of 6–14 years. The SSA programme has retained its purpose as the main policy initiative for achieving the objectives of the RTE Act 2009.

Since the implementation of the educational reforms and policies laid down by the SSA, some improvements have been made, such as reducing dropout rates in primary and elementary education, particularly for girls (Das, 2007) and increasing literacy rates (Kingdon, 2007). However, India's performance in education is still considered lacklustre in comparison to other countries, such as China (Boroorah & Iyer, 2005). Moreover, lack of progress in the areas of student-teacher ratio, quality of teaching and equitable learning attainment between various social classes have been noted (Govinda and Bandyopadhyay (2010) and the primary goal of universal enrolment of children 6–14 years old remains elusive.

Kremer, Chaudhury, and Rogers (2005) argue that teacher negligence and absence is the most important retarding factor behind

¹ The program was established in 2004 with a plan to set up 750 residential schools at elementary level for girls belonging predominantly to disadvantaged and educationally backward sections.

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