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The Learning Crisis — NEP 2020, ASER, and What India's Education System Still Gets Wrong

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The Learning Crisis — NEP 2020, ASER, and What India's Education System Still Gets Wrong

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

""India's NIPUN Bharat mission targets Grade 3 foundational literacy by 2026-27. ASER reports consistently show that learning outcomes remain poor despite high enrolment. Is NEP 2020 the right prescription? What structural reforms are needed to fix the learning crisis in Indian schools?""

WHY IN NEWS

The UN International Day of Education (January 24, 2026) focuses global attention on education quality, with the 2026 theme “AI in Education: Preserving Human Agency.” In India, it brings spotlight to the implementation of NEP 2020 and the NIPUN Bharat mission’s 2026-27 deadline — against the backdrop of ASER data showing persistent learning outcome gaps.

THE ENROLMENT ILLUSION

India has achieved something remarkable: it has enrolled almost all children in primary school. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) at the primary level is near 100%. Nearly every village in India has a primary school. The Midday Meal scheme — one of the world’s largest school feeding programmes — has made attendance economically rational for millions of poor families.

And yet.

The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), published by Pratham since 2005, has documented a persistent and uncomfortable truth: **a large proportion of children who are enrolled in and attending school are not learning.** A child completing Class 5 in many Indian states cannot fluently read a Class 2-level paragraph. A child in Class 8 cannot correctly solve a Class 4 division problem.

This is India's learning crisis — and it is not primarily a problem of access, attendance, or infrastructure. It is a problem of **what happens inside the classroom.**

WHY LEARNING OUTCOMES LAG

Several structural factors explain why school enrolment and attendance have not automatically translated to learning:

1. Teacher quality and training: India has a shortage of trained, motivated teachers — particularly in rural areas. Contract teachers, para-teachers, and high teacher absenteeism remain problems in several states. NEP 2020's response — the National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPST) and a new 4-year integrated teacher education programme — is directionally right but will take years to reshape the pipeline.

2. Rote-learning pedagogy: India's education system, for most of its post-independence history, has rewarded memorisation over comprehension. Examinations tested recall. Teachers taught to the test. Children who could recite were promoted; whether they understood was secondary.

3. Language mismatch: Children who speak one language at home and are taught in another at school face a comprehension barrier from day one. A child who speaks Bundeli or Bhojpuri at home and is taught in standard Hindi — let alone English — starts at a deficit. NEP 2020's mandate for mother-tongue instruction through Grade 5 is grounded in solid cognitive science.

4. Overcrowded classrooms: The teacher-student ratio in many government primary schools exceeds reasonable pedagogical limits. A single teacher managing 40+ students across multiple grades cannot deliver quality instruction regardless of motivation or training.

5. Systemic governance: At the school governance level — attendance monitoring, curriculum delivery, mid-level administrative support — accountability remains weak in many states.

NIPUN BHARAT — THE RIGHT MISSION?

NIPUN Bharat (National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy), launched July 2021, sets a clear target: **by 2026–27, every child should achieve foundational literacy and numeracy by the end of Grade 3.**

This is exactly the right goal. The international evidence — from the World Bank, UNESCO, and decades of education research — is clear that **foundational literacy and numeracy by age 8 is the single most predictive factor for educational outcomes through secondary and beyond.** Children who do not reach this threshold by Grade 3 rarely catch up.

What NIPUN gets right:

- Specific, measurable target with a deadline

Multi-pronged implementation: teacher training, structured pedagogy, learning materials in regional languages, assessment tools

State-level accountability with custom targets

What NIPUN needs to succeed:

Teacher training at scale: The bottleneck for NIPUN's success is not the curriculum framework but the quality of classroom teachers who can implement structured pedagogy. Training 4 million+ primary teachers in new methods is a generational challenge.

Monitoring that is honest: NIPUN tracking data risks gaming — states reporting targets met when children haven't actually achieved them. Independent monitoring (through organisations like ASER) is essential.

Post-Grade 3 continuity: Even if NIPUN succeeds by 2026-27, the learning crisis in Grades 4-8 (the Preparatory and Middle stages of NEP) will remain.

NEP 2020 — PROMISE AND PERIL

NEP 2020 is India's most ambitious education reform since independence. Its vision is correct: move from rote to conceptual, from rigid to flexible, from examination-centric to learning-centric.

The implementation challenge is formidable:

NEP is a national policy that must be implemented primarily by state governments under a concurrent subject. Education quality varies enormously between states — from Kerala (which consistently performs near the top on every learning metric) to Bihar (which faces foundational challenges).

The critical question for NEP is not design — it is governance. The 5+3+3+4 structure is pedagogically sound. The Academic Bank of Credits is progressive. PM SHRI schools are well-resourced showcases. But the 1.1 million government schools across India — where 70% of Indian children study — need transformation, not just the showcase institutions.

AI IN EDUCATION — OPPORTUNITY AND RISK

The 2026 International Day of Education theme — "AI in Education: Preserving Human Agency" — is well-timed. India is actively exploring AI in education through the IndiaAI Mission and platforms like DIKSHA.

The promise: AI can personalise learning at scale — identifying each child's specific gaps and providing targeted practice. For a country with 250 million school children and severe teacher shortages, the prospect of each child having a personalised AI tutor is transformative.

The risk: AI works well for already-literate children who can interact with technology. For the foundational learning stage (ages 3-8), human interaction, emotional warmth, and play-based learning cannot be replicated by any algorithm. Deploying AI for primary school education risks substituting expensive technology for the

teacher training and relationship-building that is actually needed.

The honest answer: AI should supplement, not substitute — augmenting teachers' capacity rather than replacing teacher presence.

WHAT WOULD ACTUALLY WORK

The evidence on what improves learning outcomes is not mysterious:

Trained, present, motivated teachers — the single biggest determinant

Teaching at the right level — TaRL (Teaching at the Right Level), pioneered by Pratham and proven in randomised trials, groups children by learning level rather than age/grade and delivers dramatic improvements

Structured pedagogy with monitoring — not free-form "activity-based" learning but systematic instruction with regular assessment

Mother tongue instruction — unambiguously improves early learning

Regular, honest assessment — not high-stakes exams but frequent low-stakes checks for understanding

NEP 2020 incorporates most of these principles. The question is whether states have the administrative capacity to implement them consistently across 1.1 million schools.

UPSC RELEVANCE

NIPUN Bharat launched July 5, 2021; NEP 2020 approved July 29, 2020 (K. Kasturirangan committee); 5+3+3+4 structure; ASER by Pratham; SDG 4 (Quality Education); PARAKH; Academic Bank of Credits; PM SHRI schools; International Day of Education: January 24, 2018 (UNGA resolution 72/222); DIKSHA platform; RTE Act 2009.

Education policy — NEP 2020 and implementation; learning outcome crisis; federal dimensions of education (Concurrent List); role of private sector; RTE and EWS reservation. **GS-3:** *AI in education — promise and risks; digital divide; EdTech regulation.*

📌 FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

KEY DATA ON INDIA'S EDUCATION OUTCOMES:

GER at primary level: **~100%** (near-universal enrolment achieved)

Learning gap: Significant proportion of Class 5 children cannot read Class 2 text (ASER data)

Teachers in government schools: **4 million+** (shortage in rural areas; absenteeism a problem)

Government school share: **~70%** of enrolled children attend government schools

NEP 2020 — IMPLEMENTATION PILLARS:

NIPUN Bharat (2021): Foundational literacy by Grade 3, 2026-27 target

PM SHRI: 14,500+ model schools

Academic Bank of Credits: Multiple entry/exit in higher education

PARAKH: New national assessment authority

NCF-SE 2023: New National Curriculum Framework for Schools

DIKSHA: Digital content + teacher training platform

SWAYAM: MOOCs for higher education

TARL (TEACHING AT THE RIGHT LEVEL):

Developed by: **Pratham** (same NGO that publishes ASER)

Approach: Group children by learning level (not grade); intensive instruction at their actual level

Proven by: Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) in multiple Indian states; globally cited

Impact: Dramatic learning gains in 30-45 days of instruction

INTERNATIONAL BENCHMARKS:

PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment): India withdrew in 2009 after poor performance; planning re-entry; PARAKH is the nodal body

TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study): Global benchmark for Grades 4 and 8 learning outcomes

SDG 4 targets: Universal primary + secondary education; gender parity; trained teachers; safe schools; 100% youth literacy

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

Midday Meal Scheme (now PM POSHAN): Covers 11.8 crore students; world's largest school feeding programme; improved attendance and nutrition

Education in Concurrent List: Both Centre and State legislate; state capacity critical for implementation

Teacher vacancy: Many states have significant government school teacher vacancies

Private school share: ~30% of enrolled children; higher in urban areas

Dropout rate: Declines progressively from primary to secondary to higher secondary; girls' dropout at secondary higher than boys

Sources: Indian Express, ASER Centre, Ministry of Education

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