

STRATEGY TO PROMOTE RURAL EDUCATION

Ashish Kumar and Sarah Iype

From being a luxury only a few could afford, today the sight of children in school uniforms even in the most remote regions of the country, has become common place. With a marked increase in first-generation learners, students are transcending the educational attainment of their parents.

Celebrated as the 'soul' of the nation, rural India comprises 70 per cent of India's population and is, in fact, home to more people than the entire continent of Europe. Despite an increasing trend in urbanization, it is projected that the majority of India will still reside in rural regions even in the year 2050. Given the country's ripe demographic opportunity, the development of rural India is critical to forge the nation's progress.

An Overview of the Education Sector in India

Table 1: Summary Statistics of Education in India

	Rural	Urban
Number of schools (in lakhs)	12.97	2.39
Number of students enrolled (in crores)	18	7.1
Number of teachers (in lakhs)	65	24

Source: UDISE 2016-17

Spread over an enormous landscape, impacting over 18 crore students (71 per cent of the nation's students), the rural school education sector accounts for over 84 per cent of the total schools in India. Historical analysis depicts admirable progress in this sector and unravels a transformation in the narrative around education. From being a luxury only a few could afford, today the sight of children in school uniforms even in the most remote regions of the country, has become common place. With a marked increase in first-generation learners, students are transcending the educational attainment of their parents. The United Nations Human Development Report reveals a doubling in the mean years of schooling from 3.0 to 6.4 between the years 1990 and 2017.

The Government of India has been successful in its efforts to universalize access to education. The *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (Education For All) launched in 2000, the Mid-Day Meal Scheme initiated in 2001, as well as the enactment of the Right to Education Act in 2009, have been instrumental in increasing

enrolment and providing equitable educational opportunities. In fact, enrolment in the age group between 6 to 14 years, across both rural and urban areas, has been above 95 per cent since 2007.

A Rural-Urban Comparison in School Education

A deeper analysis comprising a rural-urban comparison of critical indicators offers interesting insights.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics A Rural-Urban Comparison in School Education

Indicator	Rural	Urban
INFRASTRUCTURE PARAMETERS		
Percentage of schools with drinking water	96.81	98.78
Percentage of schools with girls' toilet	97.30	98.71
Percentage of schools with electricity connection	54.84	87.60
Percentage of schools having library facility	82.13	87.20
Percentage of schools established since 2002	27.40	30.63
Percentage distribution of classrooms in good condition	78.35	92.37
SCHOOL PROFILE		
Average enrolment in schools	108	208
Average number of teachers per school	5	10.2
Student Classroom Ratio	24	28
Pupil Teacher Ratio	23	22
Percentage of distribution of classrooms with enrolment <50	37.86	21.11
Percentage distribution of single teacher schools	7.77	3.84
Percentage of schools with regular head-master/ principal	40.19	49.71
Percentage of girls enrolment to total enrolment	48.69	47.04

Indicator	Rural	Urban
Percentage of schools inspected in previous academic year	46.13	31.68
Average number of instructional days	225	223
Average number of working days spent on non-teaching assignments	1.27	1.34

Source: UDISE 2016-17

In terms of school infrastructure, while there are marginal differences in the availability of drinking water facilities and toilets, the urban-rural divide is evident in terms of the provision of electricity. With a difference of over 33-percentage points, urban schools have greater access to electricity. Similarly, urban areas tend to have more schools with libraries and classrooms in good condition. Given the increasing trend in urbanization, it is no surprise that more schools were set up in urban regions.

It is interesting to note that the rural regions perform better in terms of gender parity, as evident in the ratio of girls' enrolment to total enrolment. Further, monitoring of schools seems to be more prevalent in rural areas where the coverage of school inspections exceeds urban areas by ~15 percentage points. However, data analysis suggests that rural regions fall short in terms of having optimally resourced schools. Rural schools, on average, enroll 100 less students than urban schools. While the pupil-teacher ratio is almost equivalent, rural regions have more than double the number of single-teacher schools than urban areas. This implies greater multi-grade instruction, which directly correlates with poor delivery of quality education. Similarly, rural areas also tend to have lesser schools with regular head-masters or principals, revealing weaker school leadership.

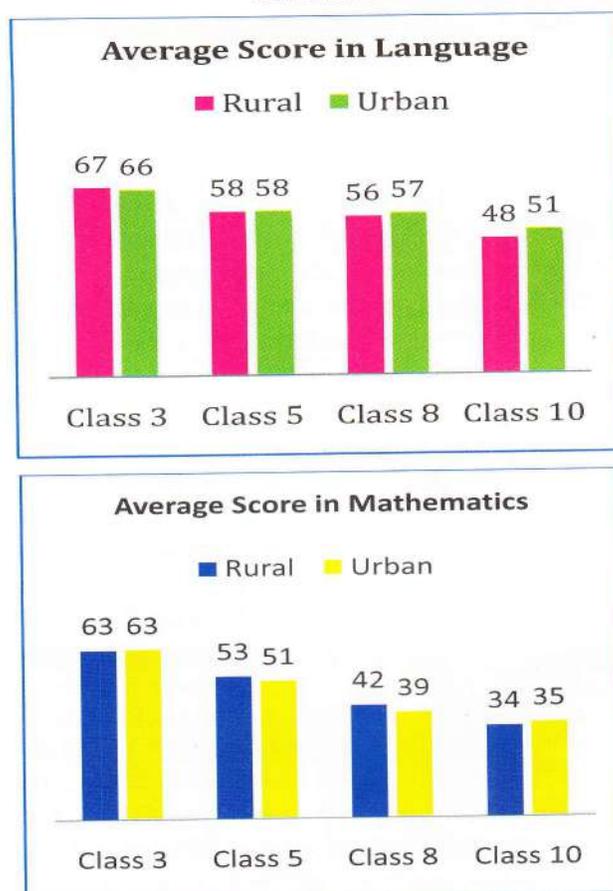
The National Achievement Survey (NAS) 2017, a competency-based assessment of learning outcomes conducted throughout the country reveals parity in learning outcomes across most grades in language and mathematics. Marginal differences exist in the average score in language in class 10, where urban areas perform better, in contrast to the average score in mathematics in class 5 and 8, where rural attainment is slightly higher. Yet, the key takeaway is the urgent need to improve the delivery of quality education across the country. Figure 1 shows that the learning outcomes decline in higher grades, as lesser students are attaining grade-level competence. The Annual Status of Education Report

(ASER), a rural survey assessing basic literacy and numeracy, presents a similar picture of low-quality education. The 2018 survey estimates suggest that only half the children can read and less than a third can do basic arithmetic. However, the survey establishes a sense of optimism. There has been a drastic reduction in the gender gap in enrolment as well as the number of out-of-school children. Further, learning outcomes have shown steady improvement since 2016.

Strategies to Promote Equitable Education

Progress from Millennium Development to Sustainable Development entails a shift in the focus from universalizing access to education, towards the delivery of quality education. India's achievement, in terms of equitable and universal access at the primary school-level, establishes an opportune platform for the education system to now deliver 'learning for all'. And, the Government is taking right steps in this direction.

Figure 1: A Rural-Urban Comparison of Learning Outcomes



Source: NAS 2017

Launched by the Prime Minister in 2018, the Transformation of Aspirational Districts Program aims to expeditiously improve the socio-economic status of some of the most backward regions in the country. With the highest weightage accorded to education, 112 Districts across the country are consistently monitored and ranked in terms of progress made, on a critical set of indicators. Anchored at the NITI Aayog and in line with its mandate to promote 'cooperative and competitive' federalism, the program is resulting in tangible progress. More than 71 districts improved their language scores in Class 3 within just 6 months since the launch of the program. There has been exceptional progress in infrastructure parameters as well, especially in the 25 districts mentored by NITI Aayog. In less than one year, between the baseline (June 2018) and midline (February-March 2019), the percentage of secondary schools with electricity has increased by over 10 percentage points, from approximately 84 per cent to 95 per cent.

NITI Aayog is also steering the Sustainable Action for Transforming Human Capital (SATH) program in Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Odisha. Home to 7 per cent of India's rural population and 8 per cent of the total schools, these three States are undertaking simultaneous academic and administrative reforms with an aim to - create efficient schools, enhance human resource capacity, strengthen organization structure and most importantly, improve learning outcomes. Implemented in partnership with the State Governments, initiatives like the learning enhancement programs, school consolidation, teacher recruitment and restructuring of the State Education Departments are leading to strengthened governance systems and resulting in greater resource efficiency. The large-scale learning enhancement programs have also led to a 10-15 per cent improvement in learning outcomes across all SATH States. Further, NITI Aayog is working towards documenting all the lessons from SATH, and is creating an implementable toolkit for other States to adopt, facilitating systemic transformation across the country.

In a novel effort, NITI Aayog released the School Education Quality Index-SEQI. The Index provides the first national ranking of States, based on the success of their school education systems. Covering critical parameters including learning outcomes, access, equity, infrastructure as well as governance processes, the index provides a relative and fair

comparison of States and Union Territories (UTs). SEQI strives to drive evidence-based policymaking and will facilitate cross learning among States/UTs. Its granular analysis includes an assessment of the overall performance in States/UTs as well as their progress over time. While the index's 30 indicators have been weighted in accordance to their correlation with the quality of education, the Equity domain is critical to ensure that States/UTs provide equitable educational opportunities for all children, irrespective of gender, region or caste. With a net weight of 21 per cent, the Equity domain captures differences in access and learning outcomes across social categories and regions. 24 out of 35 States and UTs record Equity scores above 60 per cent, with Rajasthan receiving the highest score of 79.4 per cent in the overall performance ranking. Uttarakhand stands out for parity in learning outcomes between urban and rural areas, where there is zero difference in the average scores for language and mathematics in Class 5. In fact, on aggregate, 19 States and UTs have also recorded an increase in their equity score, from the base to reference year, highlighting a positive trend towards achieving quality education for all.

India is on the verge of finalizing a new education policy. The draft National Education Policy 2019 envisions an inclusive and equitable education system where all children have an equal opportunity to learn and thrive. It advocates for equalizing participation and learning outcomes across regions through concerted policy action. Through the establishment of special education zones, targeted funding for inclusion as well as district-wise assistance for independent research on inclusive education, the policy lays the road ahead for India, building on existing efforts to this end.

As India commemorates the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, it is time we foster our school education system to 'draw out the best in child and man, in body, mind and spirit'. With over 50 per cent of the workforce estimated to come from rural India in 2050, it is imperative to establish the strongest foundations of learning through school education.

*(Ashish Kumar is Director with NITI Aayog.
Email : ashish.iofs@gov.in*

Sarah Iype is Young Professional with NITI Aayog. Email : sarah.iype@nic.in)