

Smaller citizens: On the gaps in India's education system

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Paper - II
(Governance)

The pandemic was difficult for India's youngest citizens, the children, but the true import of its impact is coming to light now. In the Annual Status of Education Report, titled 'ASER 2023: Beyond Basics' and released on Wednesday, a survey by civil society organisation Pratham among rural students aged 14 to 18, found that more than half struggled with basic mathematics, a skill they should have mastered in Classes 3 and 4. The household survey, the first field-based one in four years, was conducted in 28 districts across 26 States and assessed the foundational reading and arithmetic abilities of 34,745 students. In other findings, about 25% of this age group cannot read a Class 2 level text in their mother tongue; boys are, however, better in arithmetic and English reading skills than girls. Overall, 86.8% in the 14-18 year age group are enrolled in an educational institution, but there are gaps as they grow older — while 3.9% of 14-year-olds are not in school, the figure climbs to 32.6% for 18-year-olds. Also, for Class 11 and higher, most students opt for Humanities; while girls are less likely to be enrolled in the science stream (28.1%) compared with boys (36.3%), only 5.6% have opted for vocational training or other related courses.

The proportion of children opting for private tuition nationwide went up from 25% in 2018 to 30% in 2022. Close to 90% of the youngsters surveyed have a smartphone and know how to use it, though many are unaware of online safety settings. The trends, especially the lag in reading and solving simple arithmetic, give an inkling of what ails the education system, and the corrective measures required. The National Education Policy 2020 says the top priority is to "achieve universal foundational literacy and numeracy in primary school by 2025". The report says all States have made a major push in foundational literacy and numeracy under the NIPUN Bharat Mission, but the numbers show that in a diverse and vast country such as India, there is a lot of catching up to do. While rising enrolment is a good thing, what awaits the students after they finish the compulsory school cycle (Class 8) is not all that rosy, sometimes because they are simply not able to cope with the ambitious curriculum set for the higher secondary level. The Right to Education Act, 2009 may have ensured universal access to education, but there is many a gap to fill before it touches every child in the true spirit of the law.

Findings of the ASER 2023:

Trends on basic learning:

- Overall (of those aged 14-18), a quarter (26.5%) could not read a Class 2-level textbook in their regional language, and a little less than half (42.7%) could not read sentences in English. Of those who can read these sentences, over a quarter (26.5%) did not understand the meaning of what they were reading.
- Basic mathematics remains the big challenge. More than half of the surveyed students (56.7%) could not solve a simple 3-digit by 1-digit division problem.
- The ability to do division is seen as a proxy for the ability to do basic arithmetic operations.

Arithmetic proficiency:

- 45% of youths in the surveyed group have basic arithmetic proficiency.
- The rest need to 'catch up' as low levels of foundational numeracy affect the ability of youth in tackling everyday calculations (say, for financial computations).

Application of basic skills to everyday calculations:

- 85% of surveyed youths can measure length using a scale when the starting point is 0 cm but this drops sharply to 39% when the starting point is moved.
- This showed a decline as compared with 2017 when it was 86% and 40%. Males do better than females across all everyday calculations.

Enrollment in different streams:

- The survey shows that more than half (55.7%) of the young people in this age group were enrolled in the Arts/Humanities stream, followed by STEM (31.7%) and Commerce (9.4%).
- More males report enrolling in the STEM stream (36.3%) than females (28.1%).

Use of smartphones:

- Around 89% of those surveyed had a smartphone in the household and 92% said they knew how to use it - signalling a shift that has gathered force in the pandemic years and after.
- However, males were more than twice as likely to own their own smartphone than females, and therefore were likely spending far more time using the device for a wider variety of tasks.

Use of social media:

- Interestingly, the survey found that 90.5% of the youths in this age group reported having used social media in the reference week, with a slightly higher proportion of males (93.4%) than females (87.8%).
- However, it observed that “of all youths who used social media, only about half are familiar with online safety settings that were included in the survey”.

Expected Question for Prelims

Que. Consider the following statements with reference to the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2023:

1. According to this, about 43% of children in the age group of 14-18 cannot read sentences in English.
2. It is released by NGO Pratham.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) Only 1 (b) Only 2
(c) Both 1 and 2 (d) Neither 1 nor 2

Answer : C

Mains Expected Question & Format

Que.: “The Right to Education Act, 2009 may have ensured universal access to education, but efforts still remain to ensure it touches every child in the true spirit of the law.” Comment.

Answer's Approach:

- ❖ In the first part of the answer, discuss the major provisions of the Right to Education Act, 2009.
- ❖ In the second part, discuss the shortcomings in the actual implementation of the Right to Education Act, 2009.
- ❖ Finally give a conclusion giving suggestions.

Note: - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC mains examination. Therefore, to get an answer to this question, you can take the help of this source as well as other sources related to this topic.