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Towards A Paradigm Shift in Quality Education

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ABSTRACT

The Right to Education (RTE) Act 2009 has made a paradigm shift in public policy to ensure universal admission to public schools from the age of 6-14 as a matter of fundamental right. This has ensured university in access, cutting across genders. However, the findings of Annual Status of Education Reports (ASER) consistently reports serious shortfall in learning outcomes. This is far cry from the experience of Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, where the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores shows a more robust trend. This paper examines the contours of the ASER reports in terms of the exact shortfalls in reading and numeracy skills and makes a comparison with the PISA scores. It also makes a comparative assessment of performance of private schools as compared to the public schools and brings out the correlation between allocation and Human Development Index (HDI) outcomes. The author strongly believes that apart from doubling allocation to education, greater attention needs to be paid for improving pedagogy improving teaching skills and fostering greater partnership between the state and schools; so that this merit goods sector, become a safe way to reap demographic dividend and fruits of globalization.

1. Introduction

Quality education is a critical scaffolding to nation building, for closing the charm between the privileged few and under privileged many. Post independence, Indian ideology was more masqueraded with socialistic outlook. The thrust was to make primary education from 6 to 14 accessible to all, in order to substantiate the deep rooted denial the Indians had sustained. Post independent India observed a remarkable impetus in scientific and technological education; but illiteracy remained very high, reflecting the scars of pre independence education policy. Recognizing the fact that the educational requirement of independent India would be different, all the committees have emphasized on technological education and outcome to be the determining factor. Free and compulsory education found expression as a fundamental right by RTE Act, 2009. Till then access to primary education was limited and constrained by income. Though access was addressed through Right to Education reaching 97%, the quality of elementary education shows discernible shortfall. This has cascading impact on secondary education and higher education. This paper examines the quality dimension with reference to the ASER rendered by Pratham organization since 2010, and compares them with global assessment like PISA. It also takes note of impact of educational allocation on HDI and makes a comparison of performance of private schools with public schools in different schools and suggests a way forward.

2. ASER Reports

The ASER reports have been unceasingly updating us, year after year, on the quality dimension of Indian education with reference to promised targets in the RTE Act. Although the report primarily reflects the reading and arithmetic challenge faced by primary education nevertheless, it does not come out with the reasons for such a lamentable plight nor does it analyze the causes for poor learning outcomes. In ASER report the evaluation process in reading is done is a very transparent manner by asking a child to read a grade 2 level text. In arithmetic the process is to ask children in grade 3 to do a simple subtraction involving two digits numerical and in division of three digit number with one digit. A child entering grade 3 is expected to be reading a simple text fluently and solving arithmetic operations to be at grade level.

According to ASER All India report of 2018 children in grade 3 who are able to read grade 2 texts is 27.2% and the corresponding percentage of children who can do subtraction is 28.1%, three digit divisions can be done by only 8.5% of children. The highlights are as under.

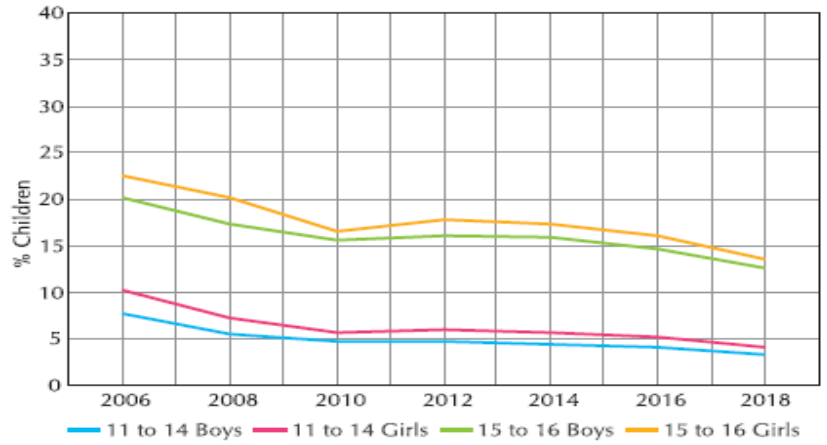
- There has been a drop of 9% in the ability to reading of students in Std-V level (38.8%) to 28.1% now.
- Similar deterioration is also noticed in respect of student's ability to divide (3 digit / 1 digit). It has dropped from 34% to 23%.
- The gender gap has shrunk from 7.2% in 2008 to 4.1%.
- The report does not dwell on learning ability in English, which was abysmally low (32%) for Std-III. The private schools fared much better.
- The percentage of children who are opting for private schools has, remained stagnant at around 30% since 2014.
- The overall enrolment has around 96% (2012-18), ensuring universal education and complying with Millennium Development Goals (MDG) targets, there is a huge variation in attendance of the students in the school.
- Reduction of percentage of girls opting out of schools after the age of 11 from 10.3% in 2008, it has now come down to 4.1%. All India decrease has been from 22.6% to 13.5%.

- Improvement in the percentage of girl's toilet available, which are usable. It has gone up from 32.9% to 66.4% now.
- Computer availability, the all India improvement has been very slow; i.e. from 15.8% to only 21%.

3. Trends of ASER 2018

The following graphs explain the trends over time of children enrolment, reading capability, as also their numeracy efficiency.

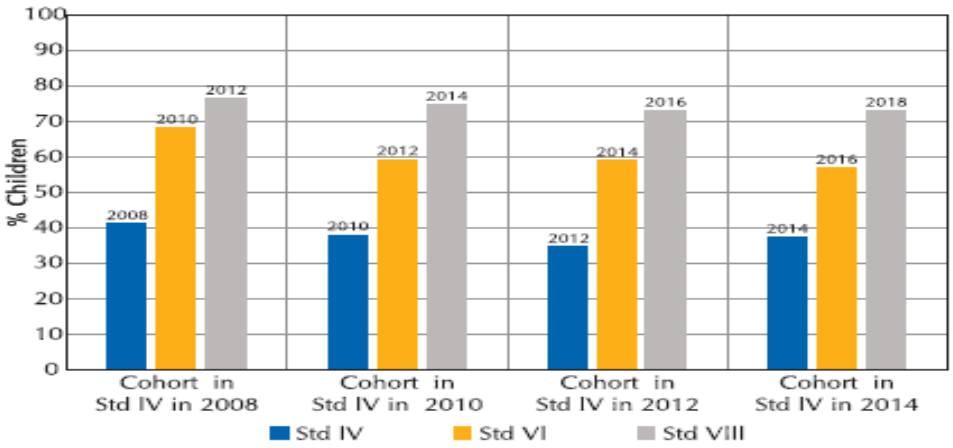
Figure 1: Trend of Percentage of Children not Enrolled



Source: ASER Report, 2018

It would be seen from the above that percentage of girls (15-16) not getting enrolled has come down from 22% in 2006 to around 13.5% during 2018.

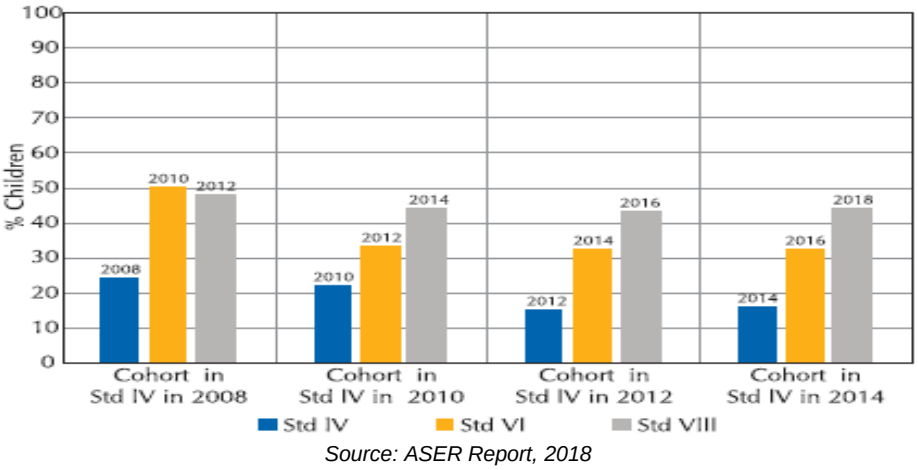
Figure 2: Trend of Percentage of Children Reading Std-II Text



Source: ASER Report, 2018

It would be seen that percentage of children who could read Std-II text, studying in Std-IV, was 4% in 2008. This increases to 76.5% when they reached Std-VIII.

Figure 3: Trend of Percentage of Children who can do Division of Std-IV



Source: ASER Report, 2018

The percentage of children who could do division sums in Std-IV was 24.1% in 2008 and was 50.2% in Std-VI in 2010.

4. ASER Compared with PISA

PISA is taken by 15 year old students worldwide. The policy orientation of PISA is to connect the learning outcome with student's background and attitudes towards learning. The OECD countries through PISA evaluation try to access a student's capacity to apply knowledge in key subjects and make analysis of the reasoning. They can communicate effectively as they do not resort to rote memorization. ASER makes the grade level assessment taken on grade 2 curriculum. This reflects our bearings to be in an already compromised situation. To compete with other OECD nations we have to comprehend our variability in quality education. Only after understanding the disparity in quality education in comparison to OECD nation, we should be able to perceive the criticality the sector is in.

India does not feature in the average score of most of the developed countries of 500-550 out of 1000 of the PISA score. The OECD countries evaluate the performance of higher secondary students for three subjects, science, reading and mathematics. This assessment is done on random sampling from schools. It would be seen from the table that countries Germany, Japan, South Korea and Australia have done exceptionally well.

Table 1: Global Trends of PISA Scores

Country	Science	Reading	Maths
Australia	570	485	494
Brazil	401	407	377
France	495	499	498
Germany	509	509	506
Japan	538	516	532
South Korea	516	517	524
Russia	487	495	494
Sweden	493	500	494
USA	496	497	476

Source: OECD Report

These countries have also become the global manufacturing hub, since they have invested very handsomely in education. Policies support educational developments, monitoring learning outcomes with periodic interventions. These improvements have not taken place due to market forces but by high allocations and the put by the public bodies, to ensure quality outcomes.

5. Comparison between Private and Public Schools

As is well known, almost 30% children go to private school in India. The table below compares performance of children in Private and Public School in different states in different aspects.

Table 2: Performance of Children in Public and Private School

State	Private School		Government School	
	Std V Reading who can Read Std II Text	Std V Arithmetic who can do division	Std V Reading who can Read Std II Text	Std V Arithmetic who can do division
All India	65.1	39.8	44.2	22.7
Kerala	77.2	43.7	73.1	33.5
Gujarat	53.7	20.1	52.0	18.4
Maharashtra	66.4	30.2	66.0	31.7
Tamil Nadu	40.7	25.4	46.3	27.1
West Bengal	50.7	29.7	50.5	29.2
Odisha	58.4	25.4	56.2	23.8

Source: ASER Report, 2018

Though the table demonstrates that private schools stand on quality, a rung higher than the government schools but the overall condition is considerably disquieting. This reflects the short sighted efforts on policy to ensure quality learning.

6. The Impact of Higher Allocation on HDI

The following table gives a global comparison of allocation to education and concomitant HDI of several countries.

Table 3: Picture of HDI, GII and Underlying Factors

Country	HDI	Allocation to Education
Norway	0.953	7.7
USA	0.924	5.0
Germany	0.936	4.9
South Korea	0.903	5.1
India	0.640	3.8

Source: Human Development Report, 2018

Quite clearly the correlation between allocation to education and HDI is very positive. Prof. Lekha S. Chakraborty in her research paper has contended that per capita spending on education has a stronger impact on HDI than growth in per capita income per se. Through pooled least square experiment she has proved that increase in public expenditure on human resource development by 1000$ could increase the HDI by 0.5%.

7. Allocation to Education in India

The following table would show the allocation trend in recent years, in primary and higher education.

Table 4: Trends in Allocation to Education Sector

Allocation	2017-2018	2018-2019 (RE)	2019-2020 (BE)	% Change over BE (18-19)
Higher Education	33614.23	33512.11	37461.01	7.00
Primary Education	46600.44	50113.75	56386.63	12.78

Source: Budget 2019-20, Government of India

The allocation to education remains fixated at around 3.9% as shown in the above table. This is far less than other countries and much less than the advocacy of Kothari Commission (1966) and the Draft Education Policy (2016) to ramp it up to 6% of our GDP.

8. Way Forward

Keeping in view the concerns of quality, it is important to take note of the pedagogy and other aspects of teaching in our primary schools. The usual teaching method followed in class room is to teach from grade level text books to top of the class, consisting of multiple levels of children in one space. The schools are constrained by scarcity of space, deficiency of teachers, ineffectual teaching learning methodology, and overcrowded classrooms, with learners from diverse learning acumen and income background. Children are left behind struggling with numbers and letters.

Any development programme delivers its strength from legislative policies. While India has a huge potential for reaping its demographic dividend because of 60% of population in the working age (15-59), it is not possible to achieve it without quality education at the primary level. If higher and technical education needs improvement then the progression must come from grassroots level. Therefore it's imperative for children to have access to quality education.

Privatization with proper accountability should be the way forward. Private schools should be provided with financial assistance with clear learning outcome expectations, failing which they will be suspended from further team work with the government. They can be evaluated from time to time, by assisting the teachers with training and children with scholarships. The gap between PISA and ASER must be narrowed, so that we work on legitimate objectives. Focus must be driven towards conceptual clarity of mathematics and English, with mentor mentee support program for children, who are unable to climb up the ladder in normal course.

Allocation to education should be increased substantially and the focus must shift to quality output and import learning to a diverse group of learners. The course of action should be directed to deliver a minimum level of basic skill to every child; simultaneously bringing those who are falling behind through mentor mentee system. A paradigm shift in educational outcomes will flow from greater attention to quality which will include higher allocation, better pedagogy, teachers' training and a synergy between the government and public and private schools. The government must pay greater attention to handhold this merit goods sector, which will be the most effective gateway to reap the increasing opportunity that globalization offer them.

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