

SMALLER CITIZENS: ON THE GAPS IN INDIA'S EDUCATION SYSTEM

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January 19, 2024 12:47 am | Updated 12:47 am IST

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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.

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