Path to Quality and Inclusive Education

This editorial is based on "India's learning report card: ASER 2024 highlights big worries in literacy and numeracy skills" which was published in The Hindu on 30/01/2025. The article brings into picture the regional disparities in India's education system, with Kerala excelling while states like Jharkhand lagging, highlighting the need for reforms in assessments and teacher training inspired by Finland.

For Prelims: **Annual Status of Education Report**, **NIPUN Bharat Mission**, **NEP 2020**, **EWS reservations**, **Gender Advancement for Transforming Institutions**, **PM eVidya**, **ARPIT (Annual Refresher Programme in Teaching)**, **National Curriculum Framework**, **Gujarat's GIFT city**, **Economic Survey 2023-24**, **BharatNet project**, **DIKSHA platform**, **Academic Bank of Credits**

For Mains: Key Developments in the Indian Education System, Key Issues Associated with the Indian Education System.

The **Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2024** reveals a complex landscape of India's education system, marked by significant regional disparities in foundational literacy and numeracy. While states like **Kerala, Himachal Pradesh, and Mizoram** lead with impressive reading levels above **64%** among Class 5 students, states like **Jharkhand, Rajasthan, and Chhattisgarh** continue to struggle with basic educational outcomes. The **persistence of rote learning, lack of teacher autonomy, and inadequate assessment systems** remain major challenges across the country. Drawing inspiration from international best practices, particularly **Finland's education model**, India needs urgent policy interventions to shift towards **skill-based, practical assessments** and enhanced teacher training programs.

What are the Key Developments in the Indian Education System?

- **Enhanced Enrollment and Declining Dropout Rates:** Enrollment in pre-primary education has steadily risen since 2018, with 3-year-old enrollment increasing from **68.1% to 77.4% by 2024 (ASER-2024).**
    - Female enrolment surged by **38.4%,** increasing from 1.57 crore to 2.18 crore, marking a significant stride toward gender equality in education.
    - Dropout rates for 15-16-year-olds declined from **13.1% in 2018 to 7.9% in 2024,** with girls' dropout rates also decreasing to 8.1%.
- **Strengthened Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN):** India has placed strong emphasis on **Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN)** to improve early learning outcomes, with structured pedagogy and teacher training initiatives.
    - The **NIPUN Bharat Mission** aims to ensure that all children attain FLN skills by Class 3 by 2026-27.
    - **ASER 2024** shows Class 3 students' reading ability in government schools improved from

16.3% in 2022 to 23.4% in 2024.

- **Greater Emphasis on Multidisciplinary Education:** **NEP 2020** promotes flexible subject choices, arts-integrated learning, and interdisciplinary education.
    - **Four-year undergraduate degrees, multiple entry-exit options**, and academic bank of credits provide more learning flexibility.
        - The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2023 is revamping school textbooks to encourage critical thinking.
    - The **CUET (Common University Entrance Test)** ensures standardized access to over 250 universities.
- **Expansion of Higher Education Opportunities for Marginalized Communities:** The Indian government has significantly **expanded scholarships, reservations, and support programs** to make higher education more inclusive.
    - Initiatives like **EWS reservations, increased SC/ST/OBC seats, and free coaching programs** have improved access for disadvantaged groups.
        - More **rural and first-generation learners** are now entering universities, bridging historical inequalities.
        - As a result, Enrollment of SC/ST students in higher education increased by 44% from 2014 to 2023 (AISHE 2023).
    - Targeted policies like **"Gender Advancement for Transforming Institutions" (GATI)** promote women's participation in STEM fields.
        - The percentage of female students in STEM fields rose to more than **40%.**
- **Global Recognition and Improvement in University Rankings:** Indian universities are gaining **global recognition**, with more institutions featuring in **QS and Times Higher Education rankings**.
    - **IITs, IIMs, IISc, and AIIMS** have strengthened their global standing due to research contributions, faculty collaborations, and international partnerships.
    - The government's **"Institutions of Eminence" (IoE) initiative** has helped selected universities **improve autonomy and global competitiveness**.
    - The **Indian Institute of Science (IISc) Bengaluru** ranked 96th in World University Rankings 2025, securing a spot among the top 100 institutions for computer science.
    - India also boasts two institutions within the top 50 and seven in the top 100 of the **QS Asia Rankings 2025**
- **Growing Presence of Private Universities and Foreign Collaborations:** Private universities are playing a crucial role in **expanding access, modernizing curricula, and attracting international faculty**.
    - Institutions like **Ashoka University and Shiv Nadar University,** are providing world-class education with a **focus on liberal arts, technology, and management**.
    - India is also allowing **foreign universities to establish campuses**, which will bring global expertise to Indian students.
    - **Deakin University and University of Wollongong from Australia** are setting up campuses in **Gujarat's GIFT city.**
- **Promotion of Multilingual Education:** NEP 2020 promotes **education in regional languages**, making courses accessible to students from non-English backgrounds.
    - AICTE has **introduced engineering textbooks in 12 Indian languages**, allowing students from rural areas to excel in technical education.
    - **New NCERT textbooks will be developed in 22 languages**, enhancing accessibility.
- **Enhancement of Teacher Training:** India has launched multiple initiatives to **train faculty in modern teaching techniques, digital pedagogy, and research skills**.
    - Programs like **PM eVidya and ARPIT (Annual Refresher Programme in Teaching),** are upskilling teachers across disciplines.
    - The **DIKSHA platform** is delivering **digital teacher training courses** to **more than 2 crore educators**.

What are the Key Issues Associated with the Indian Education System?

- **High Dropout Rates in Secondary and Higher Education:** While primary enrollment is near universal, **dropout rates increase sharply in secondary and higher education**, particularly among girls and socio-economically weaker sections.
    - Factors such as financial constraints, lack of infrastructure, early marriages, and cultural

biases contribute to this issue.
    - **ASER 2024** shows **the dropout rate for 15-16-year-olds remains at 7.9%**, with **girls dropping out at a slightly higher rate (8.1%)**.
- **Teacher Shortages and Quality Issues:** India faces a **severe shortage of qualified teachers**, with many schools operating with untrained or underqualified educators.
    - **Teacher absenteeism, outdated pedagogy**, and excessive non-teaching duties (e.g., election work, census duties) further weaken the learning process.
    - As per MoE data, about **10 lakh teaching positions** in government schools across elementary, primary, secondary and higher secondary levels are vacant.
- **Inequities in Access to Quality Education:** There is a **stark divide between rural and urban education**, as well as between government and private schools.
    - While urban areas have access to **better infrastructure, digital tools, and qualified teachers**, many rural schools lack **basic amenities, such as libraries, labs, and internet access**.
    - ASER 2024 highlights that **government school enrollment dropped from 72.9% in 2022 to 66.8% in 2024**, indicating a preference for private schools due to perceived quality differences.
        - Only **66% of schools have functional playgrounds**, and usable girls' toilets improved but still stand at just **72%.**
- **Rote Learning and Exam-Oriented System:** The Indian education system remains **heavily focused on rote memorization** rather than conceptual understanding and critical thinking.
    - The pressure of **high-stakes exams (Board exams, JEE, NEET)** discourages creativity and innovation, limiting skill-based learning.
    - The **National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2023** aims to shift towards competency-based education, but implementation remains slow.
- **Inadequate Digital Infrastructure and Digital Divide:** While digital learning is expanding, **many students, particularly in rural areas, lack access to devices and internet connectivity**.
    - This creates an urban-rural divide in e-learning adoption, hybrid education, and digital literacy.
    - ASER 2024 shows **90% of 14-16-year-olds have smartphone access**, but only **57% use them for education**, indicating a **gap in digital literacy and guided learning**.
        - The **BharatNet project** aims to connect **2.5 lakh gram panchayats with high-speed internet**, but progress has been slow.
- **Skill Gap and Mismatch Between Education and Employability**: Despite increasing enrollment in higher education, **many graduates remain unemployable** due to a lack of practical skills.
    - The curriculum is often **not aligned with industry needs**, resulting in **low workforce productivity**.
    - **Economic Survey 2023-24** highlighted that only **51.25%** of the country's youth is deemed employable.
- **Lack of Research and Development Investment:** India lags in university-driven research, with most R&D happening in government labs, not educational institutions.
    - The absence of collaboration between **universities and industries leads to low patents and innovation.** Funding is inadequate, and many PhD holders struggle with proper research support due to funding gaps.
    - **India spends only 0.64% of its GDP on R&D,** lagging behind countries like South Korea (4.8%) and China (2.4%)

What Measures to Strengthen India's Education System

- **Expanding Vocational and Skill-Based Education:** The education system must shift towards **industry-aligned skill development** to make students employable.
    - Introducing **mandatory vocational training from Class 6**, will bridge the skills gap.
    - Collaboration with **NSDC, ITIs, and private companies** can provide internships and real-world exposure.
    - A **national credit framework** should allow students to transition between academic and vocational pathways seamlessly.
- **Improving Teacher Training and Pedagogy:** Teachers must be empowered with **continuous**

professional development and autonomy to design effective learning methods.
    - A **blended learning approach**, combining **digital resources with traditional teaching**, should be made mandatory in all schools.
    - National and state-level **teacher mentorship programs** should ensure experienced educators guide younger teachers.
        - The **DIKSHA platform** should be expanded with AI-driven personalized training modules.
- **Reducing Rote Learning and Reforming Assessments:** Shifting from **rote-based learning to conceptual and analytical thinking** will improve educational outcomes.
    - Board exams and entrance tests should focus on **application-based questions** rather than memorization.
        - A **modular assessment system**, where students are tested multiple times throughout the year, can reduce exam stress.
    - Encouraging **open-book exams and problem-solving projects** will promote real-world learning.
    - The **National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2023** must be implemented effectively, emphasizing **experiential learning and multidisciplinary studies**.
- **Expanding Digital Infrastructure and Reducing the Digital Divide:** Expanding **BharatNet and PM e-Vidya initiatives** to provide high-speed internet to rural schools can bridge the digital divide.
    - Every school should be equipped with **smart classrooms, interactive boards, and digital libraries** for enhanced learning experiences.
    - **Public-private partnerships (PPPs)** can provide affordable tablets and laptops to students in government schools.
    - AI-driven **adaptive learning platforms** should be developed to offer personalized educational content.
        - Schools should conduct **digital literacy training for parents** to ensure technology is used effectively at home.
- **Making Higher Education More Accessible and Globally Competitive:** Universities should adopt **flexible, multi-disciplinary degree programs** as recommended by **NEP 2020** to provide students with diverse career options.
    - Expanding the **Academic Bank of Credits (ABC)** will allow students to transfer credits across institutions.
        - **Foreign universities** should be encouraged to set up campuses in India to improve global academic exposure.
    - More scholarships and **low-interest student loans** should be introduced to support students from weaker sections.
- **Increasing Public Investment in Education:** The government must raise **education spending to at least 6% of GDP**, as recommended by **NEP 2020**, to ensure quality improvements.
    - Funding should be **performance-linked**, ensuring states that show better learning outcomes receive additional resources.
    - More **corporate social responsibility (CSR) funds** should be directed toward education, especially for underprivileged students.
        - A **transparent fund utilization tracking system** should be introduced to monitor spending efficiency.
- **Strengthening Women's Education and Gender Equality:** Scholarships and **financial incentives for female students**, especially in **STEM fields**, should be expanded.
    - Schools should introduce **gender-sensitive curricula** to promote equality and break societal stereotypes.
    - Expanding **hostel facilities and transportation services** for girls in rural areas will improve secondary and higher education participation.
        - **Menstrual hygiene awareness programs and free sanitary products** should be provided in schools to ensure attendance.
- **Reducing Bureaucratic Hurdles and Political Interference in Education:** Education policies should be designed based on **scientific research and evidence-based models**, not political considerations.
    - Streamlining the **approval process for private schools and universities** can encourage innovation and competition.
        - State and central governments should work collaboratively, ensuring a **long-term**

vision for education beyond electoral cycles.

- **Experiential and Community-Based Learning:** Moving beyond textbook-based education, schools should integrate experiential learning models where students engage with real-world problems.
    - **Schools can adopt "learning by doing" approaches** through farm-based education, heritage walks, financial literacy projects, and environmental conservation programs.
    - **Community learning hubs** where students interact with local artisans, entrepreneurs, and professionals can make education more practical and career-oriented.
- **Peer Teaching and Cross-Age Learning:** Introducing structured **peer teaching programs**, where older students mentor younger ones, can improve retention and foster leadership skills.
    - This not only **reinforces learning for the mentors** but also helps **slow learners** grasp concepts more effectively through **simplified peer explanations**.
    - Cross-age learning in **multigrade classrooms** has proven successful in countries like **Japan and Denmark**, where students learn **collaboratively across age groups**.
- **Reviving Local Knowledge Systems and Indigenous Learning:** India has a **rich tradition of indigenous knowledge**, which should be integrated into the formal education system.
    - Schools can introduce **traditional Indian sciences like Ayurveda, organic farming, handloom techniques, and local architectural methods** as part of practical learning.
    - **Storytelling traditions from different Indian communities**, including **Panchatantra, Jataka Tales, and tribal folklore**, can be used to teach moral and ethical lessons.

What Can India Learn from Other Countries' Education Systems?

Country	Key Education Policies	Takeaway
South Korea	- School seven days a week - 5.3% of GDP spent on education	Build a strong foundation and pay educators well
Finland	- Formal schooling starts at age 7 - No homework or standardized testing until high school - Free college education, including masters and doctoral	Delaying school entry and accessible higher education is beneficial
Switzerland	- Multilingual education (4 national languages) - Emphasis on experiential learning (art, music from age 3) - Apprenticeship program after elementary school - Optional secondary school	Flexible education system accessible to all

The Netherlands	- Minimal or no homework until age 10 - No competition or grading against peers - Emphasis on hands-on learning and experience-based teaching	Encourage mental well-being and hands-on learning

Conclusion

To strengthen India's education system, a comprehensive approach is needed, **focusing on skill-based learning, teacher empowerment, and equitable access to resources.** Policy interventions must address **regional disparities, reduce rote learning, an d embrace digital advancements.** By fostering inclusive, practical, and globally competitive education, India can unlock its true potential. **Prioritizing education is key to sustainable growth and a prosperous future for India.**

Drishti Mains Question:

Evaluate the key challenges facing India's education system. How effective have recent reforms like NEP 2020 and NIPUN Bharat Mission been in addressing these issues? Suggest additional measures to improve the quality and accessibility of education in India.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Prelims

Q. Which of the following provisions of the Constitution of India have a bearing on Education? (2012)

1. Directive Principles of State Policy
2. Rural and Urban Local Bodies
3. Fifth Schedule
4. Sixth Schedule
5. Seventh Schedule

Select the correct answer using the codes given below:

(a) 1 and 2 only

(b) 3, 4 and 5 only

(c) 1, 2 and 5 only

(d) 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5

Ans: (d)

Mains

Q1. Discuss the main objectives of Population Education and point out the measures to achieve them in India in detail. **(2021)**

Q2. How have digital initiatives in India contributed to the functioning of the education system in the country? Elaborate on your answer. **(2020)**