From RTE 2009 to NEP 2020: Policies, practices and progress towards equipping youth for the future

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Introduction

In the past two decades, schooling and basic learning (or foundational literacy-numeracy as it is now called) have been at the forefront of educational debates and discussions in India. These deliberations have certainly influenced significant shifts in policies and priorities in recent times. More than ten years ago, the Right to Education (RTE) Act became a law; it gave legislative backing to the goal of universal elementary schooling. The new National Education Policy (NEP) was launched in 2020. This policy takes a more comprehensive view on how to provide quality education for the entire age range – age 3 to university - in order to strengthen our education system and prepare well for the future.

Unlike the usual country wide ASER surveys, this year's ASER report – ASER 2023 – is not large in scale; only one or two rural districts in each state have been studied.[2] The main aim has been to understand the current status of the age group 14 to 18 with a wide angled lens. The launch of this report provides a timely opportunity to look at policies and practices from the point of view of this relatively understudied age group. As is well known, the Right to Education law is applicable up to age 14 or Std VIII – the end of the elementary school stage. At the other end of the age range, to be employed full time in the formal sector, you need to be at least eighteen years old. With its focus on adolescents,[3] does ASER 2023 bring any new inputs or insights into the current thinking for what more can be done for and by young people in India?

Schooling

As far as schooling is concerned, overall enrollment numbers are well known. Available data points to the fact that for the elementary school age population, enrollment levels are close to being universal (ASER 2022, UDISE). Data from 2005-2006 shows India's enrollment in Std VIII to be a little over 11 million. By 2020-21, this number had reached over 22 million (UDISE). Transition rate from elementary school (Std VIII) to secondary school (Std IX) also is high at 88.81% nationally (UDISE). In short, today more children in India have more years of schooling than ever before.

Universal secondary enrollment is a national goal.[4] The recent ASER 2023 data shows that in the sampled rural districts, more than 85% of youth (age 14-18) are currently enrolled in some kind of educational institution.[5] On the one hand, movement towards achieving this national goal is laudable. On the other hand, this trend is accompanied by rising pressures on individuals and institutions. ASER 2022 data showed that more than 80% of mothers and fathers of students enrolled in Std VIII in 2022 had less than 10 years of school (half of mothers and a fourth of fathers of Std VIII children had no schooling). It is very likely that such parents aspire for a future for their children that they themselves could not have. These aspirations translate into acute academic competition, widespread coaching, heavy expenditure by families. All of these add to examination pressures often accompanied by severe disappointments for the student and the family, if exam results are poor.

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[2] From its inception in 2005, the usual ASER survey (focused on schooling and basic learning) was done every year for ten years for all rural districts, until 2014. Since then, the usual ASER is done every alternate year. In the "gap" year, a particular age group is chosen as focus. The selected age group for 2017 was 14-18-year-olds. The 2019 ASER looked at 4- to 8-year-olds. The gap year ASER surveys are smaller in scale (usually 1-2 districts per state) but take a deeper look at different aspects of education and development for that age group.

[3] According to the Child Labour Amendment Act 2016, an adolescent is a person who has completed age 14 but not yet completed 18.

[4] NEP 2020 refers to "… goal to achieve 100% gross enrollment ratio from pre-school to secondary level by 2030." (section 3.1 p 10)

[5] For the age group 14 and 15, the proportion of youth not enrolled is less than 8%. At age 16, the figure is 11%. After age 16, the percentage of youth not enrolled rises but even at age 18, in the ASER 2023 sample, a little over two thirds are still enrolled.

Key Takeaway: Enrollment levels are high and rising for the secondary stage. At the same time, there is tremendous pressure on students to do well in high-stakes examinations.

Opportunity: NEP 2020 speaks of the goal of 100% secondary school enrollment, and proposes to do this through "careful tracking of students' enrollment, attendance, and learning levels, so that they can be provided suitable opportunities to re-enter school and/or catch up".[6] Examination pressure can be reduced by reforming how and when assessments happen. The NEP 2020 has several recommendations for examination reform and flexibility. Further, if more and more youth remain enrolled, this gives the education system additional time and space to equip them for the life that is ahead of them.
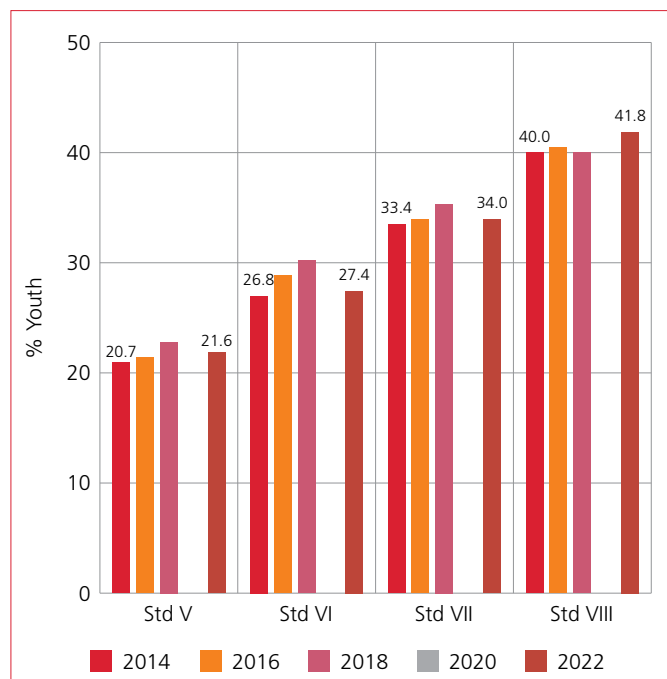
Foundational Literacy and Numeracy

Trends on basic learning have remained relatively unchanged over the last decade. Although the National Achievement Survey (NAS) and ASER use different metrics and methods for assessing learning, both point to the fact that basic learning levels of elementary school children need significant improvement. NEP 2020 also clearly states the urgent need for ensuring that by Std III, children have acquired basic reading and arithmetic skills.[7,8] NIPUN Bharat is the government's operational plan for implementation of programs for achieving this goal. For Std I and II, in most states, energetic and focused action is currently visible under NIPUN Bharat. The combination of the launch of NEP 2020 and schools opening after a long period after the pandemic has led to early grades getting much needed and focused attention.

But what about the middle school children in the last few years? These are the students who are in secondary school today.

The data shown in Chart 1 is for students who can do at least a 3-digit by 1-digit numerical division calculation. This can be used as a rough proxy for basic number knowledge and operations which children should have acquired in their primary school years. The chart shows ASER data for the eight year period from 2014 to 2022. It shows, first, that

Chart 1: Basic math trends over time: Std V-VIII: % Children enrolled in government schools who can do at least division: ASER All India (rural) 2014-2022

learning trajectories over these grades are relatively flat (for example, the difference between learning levels in Std VII versus Std VI or V is not very much). Second, levels of basic learning in Std V-VIII have not seen much improvement in the last decade. As far as basic math is concerned, a comprehensive strategy for learning improvement, starting with basic skills, is urgently needed for the upper primary grades (similar trends are visible for reading as well).[9]

ASER 2023 data from the sampled districts is an extension of these trends. 45% of youth in the age group 14-18 have basic arithmetic proficiency. The rest need to "catch up". Low levels of foundational numeracy affect the ability of youth in tackling everyday calculations where they need to apply measurement or use the unitary method in practical situations, or even do simple financial computations (managing a budget, applying a discount or calculating interest rates or repayment of a loan).[10]

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[6] NEP 2020 Chapter 3 (3.3) p.10

[7] As per NEP 2020, "the highest priority of the education system will be to achieve universal foundational literacy and numeracy in primary school by 2025. The rest of this Policy will become relevant for our students only if this most basic learning requirement (i.e., reading, writing, and arithmetic at the foundational level) is first achieved." (NEP 2020 section 2.2 p. 8)

[8] NIPUN stands for National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy. This is the mission that is to translate the policy into practice. In the last two years, state governments have prepared implementation plans with the stated goals in mind and are developing mechanisms for tracking and monitoring progress.

[9] State level achievement surveys (SEAS) which have been conducted by government in November 2023 are also expected to generate block level data on FLN even for students in Std IX.

[10] ASER 2023 data provides several examples of how youth who lack basic arithmetic skills struggle to do everyday calculations.

Key Takeaway: "Catch up" efforts for foundational literacy and numeracy are needed for a significant portion of the 14-18 population,[11] not only for doing better in school but also for everyday needs. Data from ASER 2023 indicates that building foundational literacy and numeracy may be needed for about a fourth of youth in the 14-18 age group.

Opportunity: NEP 2020 recognizes the need for "catch up" in the case of those who have fallen behind. Thus, programs could be put in place, if they do not already exist, to help students from Std VIII and higher grades who are lagging behind academically.

Digital access and digital possibilities for the future

These are among the most often discussed topics these days. There are many views on how different facets of technological change and digital advances will affect our lives in the future. At least in terms of access and connectivity, ASER data provides several clear trends. Smartphones have penetrated swiftly into the hinterland in India. During the ASER 2023 survey, in sampled rural districts, close to 90% of the 14-18 age group reported having a smartphone at home and more than 90% reported being able to use such a device. During the household survey, at very short notice, when the adolescent being surveyed was asked to bring a smartphone to do digital tasks, 67% could do so without much difficulty.[12]

Key takeaway: Youth have access to smartphones and know how to use them. Connectivity is available for the most part even in most interior villages.

Opportunity: Given that the digital backbone of the country is rapidly getting built, schools should add digital skills into their toolkit so that it becomes possible to orient, train, and incentivise young people to build better digital capability on scale for using digital resources for variety of purposes. NEP 2020 strongly recommends leveraging technology to improve educational processes and outcomes by promoting digital literacy and tech-based initiatives.

Work

What more can ASER tell us about "beyond basics" and youth? Exploring youth aspirations is a much harder task than tracking enrollment or learning. Still ASER 2023 offers some insights. First, most students want to study more. More than half of those not currently enrolled also want to study further. At least a Bachelor's degree if not more seems to the aspiration of majority of young people in this age group.

For a variety of reasons, many are already working, even while they are enrolled. Among males, a third of those in Std X or below, 40% of those in Std XI and XII, and close to 50% of those currently studying beyond Std XII are working alongside their studies (figures for females are lower, perhaps due to higher work force participation in the home). Among males who are still in secondary or higher secondary grades and are working alongside, more than 80% work in family farms or other family enterprises. Second, vocational skilling is not the first choice for youth. The data for this age group shows that less than 6% are currently doing vocational courses.[13]

Key takeaway: A significant proportion of young people work while they are still in school or college. Working on family farms or family enterprises may be needed for the family's economic calculations but it is also possible that most non-family work does not consider the fact that working students may need flexibility of time.

[11] Previous ASER reports (for example: ASER 2018, 2022) point to the need for FLN in Std VIII for approximately 25% of children enrolled in that grade.

[12] ASER surveys usually go to households on either Saturday or Sunday. This may increase the likelihood of being able to find a smartphone at home to use.

[13] Qualitative data collected during 2023 in a separate study (referred to in the "Aspirations" section of the ASER 2023 report on page 58) shows that while vocational skilling is not an aspiration, young people may consider vocational skilling paths as realistic, back up options.

Opportunity: How can the time spent working while being enrolled be used effectively for skill building and for gaining a variety of work experiences? Is this where flexible internships and local apprenticeships can be designed? For example, the system of community colleges in the United States caters to young people who need to work but also want to study. NEP 2020 makes a serious attempt to "re-imagine vocational education" and recommends "integration of vocational education programmes into mainstream education in all education institutions in a phased manner".[14] Does housework have to simply be chores or can these be seen as different kinds of projects linked as part of the curriculum?

Way forward

In India, education policies in the decade 2010 to 2020 have helped in setting priorities for the country. NEP 2020 has been shaped by a stocktaking of the past, by absorbing the accumulated evidence and recent experience and also by imagining what the future will be like. For the next decade and more, this policy can provide direction on how we as a country need to prepare for the future.

Along with RTE becoming a law in 2009, India's school enrollment rates have stayed close to universal levels in elementary school, despite school closures and disruptions due to the pandemic. In fact, the priority of "schooling for all" has pushed enrollment levels to rise well beyond the mandated compulsory stage.

NEP 2020 has re-imagined the "foundation stage" (age 3 to age 8). The government's NIPUN Bharat mission has begun to rework structures and practices. Some of these changes are already visible on the ground. Across school education, a variety of initiatives are taking off that include "catch up" efforts for basic learning, streamlining and building up assessment mechanisms at state and central levels. NEP 2020 also envisions a rehaul of curriculum content at the secondary stage to bring in "greater depth, greater critical thinking, greater attention to life aspirations and greater flexibility and student choice of subjects".[15] Like the pathway linking NEP to NIPUN in early grades, similar efforts are needed for translating middle school and secondary school reform ideas into action. Close tracking of outcomes will be key to improvements and eventual success.

For secondary school age students, NEP 2020's perspective on "learning for work" is largely dependent on a "complete re-imagination" of how vocational education is offered to students in the future.[16] Changing perceptions and practices with respect to vocational skilling will be key to the transformation that is required. One of the consequences of universal elementary education is that it raises student and family aspirations for an academic pathway leading to white collar jobs. Not only does this lead to cutthroat competition for getting into colleges, but it also closes young minds to the possibility of exploring other livelihood pathways for progress. The responsibility for creating a new highway for transition from school to work lies not only on the education system but also with industry. Developing a variety of effective paths to help young people find productive livelihoods so that they can live fruitful lives is one of the major challenges facing India today.

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[14] NEP 2020 Chapter 16 (16.4) p. 44

[15] NEP 2020. Chapter 4 (section 4.2) p. 11

[16] NEP 2020. Chapter 16 (section 16.3) p 44