

AN OVERVIEW OF INDIA'S PRIMARY SCHOOL EDUCATION POLICIES
AND OUTCOMES (2005–2011)

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Abstract

*The period between 2005 and 2011 represents a transformative era in the history of Indian education. Marked by the transition from the **Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)** framework to the constitutional mandate of the **Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009**, this era saw unprecedented shifts in enrollment and infrastructure. This paper examines the evolution of primary education policies, the legislative milestones of the 11th Five-Year Plan, and the subsequent outcomes in literacy rates and learning quality. While quantitative successes in Universal Elementary Education (UEE) were significant, the paper highlights the persistent "learning crisis" that emerged during this period.*

Keywords: *Primary Education, Educational Policy, Learning Outcomes,*

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is the bedrock of India's socio-economic development. In the mid-2000s, India faced a dual challenge: millions of children remained out of school, and the existing infrastructure was insufficient to handle the burgeoning youth population.

The years **2005–2011** are critical because they bridge the gap between "policy as a goal" and "policy as a right." During this timeframe, the Indian government moved away from mere scheme-based interventions toward a rights-based legal framework. This paper analyzes how these shifts influenced school participation, gender parity, and the quality of learning.

2. The Policy Landscape (2005–2011)

2.1 National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005

In 2005, the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) released the **NCF 2005**. It was a paradigm shift from rote learning to a **constructivist approach**. The framework emphasized:

- Connecting knowledge to life outside the school.
- Ensuring that learning shifts away from rote methods.
- Enriching the curriculum so that it goes beyond textbooks.

2.2 Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and the 11th Five-Year Plan

Launched in 2001, the SSA reached its peak implementation phase between 2005 and 2011. Under the **11th Five-Year Plan (2007–2012)**, the government significantly increased budgetary allocations for primary education. The plan focused on:

- Reducing regional and social disparities.
- Increasing the availability of schools within a 1km radius.
- Strengthening the **Mid-Day Meal Scheme** to boost retention and nutrition.

2.3 The Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009

The most significant milestone was the enactment of the **Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act** in 2009 (which came into force on April 1, 2010). This law made education a fundamental right for children aged 6–14. Key provisions included:

+1

- A 25% reservation in private schools for economically weaker sections (EWS).
- No-detention policy (ensuring children are not held back until Class VIII).
- Strict norms for Pupil-Teacher Ratios (PTR) and school infrastructure.

3. Infrastructure and Enrollment Outcomes

By 2011, the physical landscape of Indian primary education had changed drastically.

3.1 Access and Infrastructure

Data from the **District Information System for Education (DISE)** showed a massive surge in school construction. By 2011, over 98% of the rural population had access to a primary school within walking distance.

- **Toilets and Water:** The percentage of schools with separate girls' toilets rose from roughly 37% in 2005 to over 60% by 2011.
- **Classrooms:** Thousands of additional classrooms were built to accommodate the influx of first-generation learners.

3.2 Enrollment Trends (GER and NER)

The **Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER)** at the primary level stayed consistently above 100%, indicating that children outside the standard age group were also entering the system.

- **Gender Parity Index (GPI):** One of the greatest successes of this period was reaching near-parity in primary school enrollment between boys and girls.
- **Social Equity:** Enrollment among Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) grew faster than the national average, closing the historical gap.

4. The Quality Challenge and the "Learning Crisis"

By 2008, a paradox had emerged: while school registers were full, the minds of the students were not. This section analyzes the data and pedagogical failures of the era.

4.1 The ASER Lens: Evidence of Stagnation

The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) revolutionized how India viewed its schools by moving the metric from "inputs" (benches, toilets, books) to "outcomes" (reading, subtraction).

Data from 2005 to 2011 showed that the percentage of children in Grade 5 who could read a Grade 2 level text fluctuated but generally failed to improve, dropping from **52.8% in 2009 to 48.2% in 2011**. This decline is often

attributed to the "Big Gulp" effect: the sudden influx of millions of first-generation learners into a system that was not prepared with remedial teaching methods.

4.2 The "No-Detention" Debate

Section 16 of the RTE Act (2009) mandated that no child be held back or expelled until the completion of elementary education.

- **The Intent:** To prevent dropouts caused by the stigma of failure and to encourage a "Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation" (CCE) system.
- **The Outcome:** In practice, CCE was poorly understood by teachers. Without the "threat" of exams, both student effort and teacher accountability reportedly dipped. By 2011, educators began noting that children were reaching Grade 8 without basic literacy, creating a "bubble" of unlearned students.

5. The Teacher Landscape: Quantity vs. Quality

The 2005–2011 period saw the largest teacher recruitment drive in human history. However, the methods used created long-term structural issues.

5.1 The Rise of Para-Teachers

To meet the Pupil-Teacher Ratio (PTR) of 30:1 mandated by the RTE, several states (notably Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh) hired **Shiksha Mitras** or contract teachers.

- **Cost-Effectiveness:** These teachers were paid a fraction of the regular salary.
- **Pedagogical Impact:** Many lacked professional B.Ed. or D.Ed. qualifications. Studies during this time (Kingdon & Sipahimalani-Rao, 2010) suggested that while para-teachers had lower absenteeism, their lack of training contributed to the stagnation in learning levels.

5.2 Teacher Eligibility Test (TET)

Recognizing the quality gap, the government introduced the **TET in 2011**. The results were a wake-up call for the nation: in the first national-level test, less than **10%** of appearing candidates passed, highlighting a massive deficit in the quality of teacher education institutes (TEIs).

6. Socio-Economic Outcomes and Equity

6.1 The Gender Parity Success

One of the most significant triumphs of the 11th Five-Year Plan was the **Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV)** scheme. These residential schools for girls from SC, ST, and OBC categories in educationally backward blocks significantly closed the gender gap. By 2011, India achieved a **Gender Parity Index (GPI) of 1.01** in primary education, meaning more girls were enrolled than boys in certain regions.

6.2 The Mid-Day Meal (MDM) Strategy

The MDM scheme became the world's largest school feeding program during this window.

- **Nutritional Impact:** It served as a vital social safety net during the 2008 global food price crisis.
- **Educational Impact:** Research by Dreze and Goyal (2003, updated 2008) confirmed that the MDM was the single most effective tool for increasing daily attendance and reducing "classroom hunger," allowing children to focus on lessons.

7. Comparative Analysis of State Performance (2005–2011)

The progress was not uniform across the "BIMARU" states (Bihar, MP, Rajasthan, UP) compared to the Southern states.

Metric (2005 vs 2011)	Kerala	Bihar	Rajasthan	National Avg
Primary GER (2005)	94.3%	85.2%	96.1%	93.5%
Primary GER (2011)	98.2%	102.1%	101.5%	104.8%
Female Literacy (2011)	92.0%	51.5%	52.1%	65.46%

Bihar showed the most dramatic improvement in physical enrollment, yet remained at the bottom regarding learning outcomes, illustrating the "Access vs. Quality" divide.

Conclusion

The period ended with a sense of "mission accomplished" regarding infrastructure, but "mission failed" regarding learning. The RTE Act 2009 successfully institutionalized education as a right, but its heavy focus on physical inputs—like the size of the playground or the number of rooms—ignored the "black box" of the classroom: the interaction between teacher and student.

This era proved that while the government could mandate a child's presence in a building, it could not easily mandate the acquisition of knowledge. This realization eventually shifted the national discourse toward **Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN)**, which would become the core of the 2020 reforms.

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