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RESEARCH ARTICLE

FROM ENROLMENT TO LEARNING: AN ANALYSIS OF READING SKILL AMONG ELEMENTARY STUDENTS OF INDIA

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Abstract

Elementary education is a fundamental right in India. Different government initiatives such as the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act 2009, Samagra Shiksha, and the National Education Policy-2020 have contributed in enrolment at the elementary level. However, high enrolment rate has not translated into learning outcomes due to inadequate infrastructure, dearth of quality teachers and post pandemic disruptions. This study is an attempt to explore elementary education with reference to enrolment and reading skills. Based on secondary sources such as the report namely Women and Men in India published by the Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation (Mo SPI) and ASER, the study focuses on trends in enrolment across gender and reading skills among elementary students over the past decade. Government interventions at elementary level have played a major role in bringing children into schools. However, learning outcomes remain unsatisfactory. Data from ASER (2014-2024) consistently showed that a good number of students enrolled in Std. VIII are unable to read the text of lower primary levels. Finally, the study underscores that educational development in India has entered a new phase where the challenge is no longer limited to ensuring school enrolment but extends to learning outcomes for every child. Although India has made remarkable progress in expanding elementary education, the persistence of low foundational literacy and numeracy indicates a gap between access and achievement.

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Introduction:-

The Constitution of India in Article 45 States, "The State shall Endeavor to provide, within a period of ten years from the commencement of this Constitution, for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years" India's quest for universal elementary education began more than seven decades ago with this Constitutional mandate. With the objectives to provide free and compulsory elementary education to children between 6-14 years, to increase enrolment level, decrease the rate of dropout and maximize learning, a number of initiatives have been taken in the form of policy, programs and constitutional amendments. Few of them are National Policy on Education, 1968, 42nd Constitutional amendment (1976) by which Education has been added in concurrent list, National Policy on Education (1986), District Primary Education Program (1994) and many more. The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan launched in 2001 and the enactment of the Right to Education act on April 1,

2010 contributed well as India has achieved strong success in providing near-universal access to the 6–14-year students, with 85.9 % enrolment in primary school 76.2 % in upper primary school (ASERO, 2024). However, more efforts are needed in qualitative terms as learning outcomes are opposed to quantitative terms (Pandey, 2019). Studies reported that the accessibility is not being translated into learning. Despite the high enrolment and attendance rates, relevant learning outcomes across all levels are low (Pandey, 2018) and student learning outcomes consistently indicated that universal access has not translated into improved educational quality (Avvisati, 2017). Shah and Steinberg (2019) reported that learning levels have significantly declined between 2010 and 2018 and Covid-19 led school closures have increased the learning crisis in India. Statistics (World Bank, 2019) revealed that 55% of India's school-going children are unable to read and comprehend a short, age-appropriate text. National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 also highlights the problem of children's low foundational skills (i.e. reading and math scores) in elementary education and less participation.

The report of PISA (2018) reported that though universalization of education has been achieved by establishing a number of schools. However, these schools are of unequal quality which makes it impossible for students from different economic groups to meet and learn together. PISA results also show that there is a positive relationship between investment in education and average performance. The government's data suggests that 18.5% of India's schools continue to lack the necessary minimum professional qualifications and a third of our schools (34.4%) lack the requisite number of teachers as per the Right to Education Act norms. Attracting the most qualified teachers to the most challenging classrooms will play a critical role in determining the success of India's educational success. India needs to do more to restore the dignity of the teaching profession. Investment in equitable education while addressing regional, gender and social disparities can correct historic wrongs done to India's poor and socially disadvantaged. The primary objectives of the study is to explore the enrolment rate and basic reading skill among elementary students.

Reading: A Foundation for All Learning: -

Reading is an essential activity in our daily life; is a cognitive process which involves decoding symbols to arrive the meaning. According to Hoover & Gough (1990), reading is decoding and understanding the text. It enhances comprehension, expands vocabulary, and stimulates critical thinking. Mastering various reading techniques is essential for efficient studying and information retention. Reading is a fundamental skill that plays a crucial role in personal and academic success. According to Stainthorp (2021), "A fairly basic definition would be that reading means accessing language through the eyes rather than through the ears." In formal educational settings, reading is an essential skill that supports many aspects of learning (Olayinka, 2025). When children start schooling, one of the first milestones they achieve is foundational skills in reading, such as phonics, vocabulary and comprehension. Reading is the key to unlocking a world of possibilities for students' future learning. It opens the door to future learning across subjects such as math, science, and social science. Reading is the thread that ties learning together. Thus, gradually, reading transits from "learning to read" to "reading to learn" (Nebraska, 2026).

This scenario of reading skill in India is concerning as ASER report found that only 23.4% of Standard III students in government schools can read a Standard II-level text, which reflects that the persistent learning crisis continues to impair India's 250 million students despite decades of investment in school education. Reading is always seen as Reading Literacy. According to UNESCO (n.d) Reading Literacy is "An ability to read and write, with understanding, a short, simple statement relevant to one's everyday life." Similarly, PISA (2018) defines literacy as "Reading literacy is understanding, using, evaluating, reflecting on and engaging with texts in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential and to participate in society" According to PIRL's 2021 Assessment Framework, "Reading literacy is the ability to understand and use those written language forms required by society and/or valued by the individual. Readers can construct meaning from texts in a variety of forms. They read to learn, to participate in communities of readers in school and everyday life, and for enjoyment." However, a distinction between reading and reading literacy. Reading primarily refers to the mechanical process of decoding symbols and recognizing word whereas reading literacy encompasses word recognition, comprehension, fluency and motivation. Therefore, reading is vocalizing written while reading literacy reflects meaningful engagement with the text.

Elementary Stage: -

The elementary stage is a very important stage in formal education as it lays the foundation for an individual's overall development and for building a better society, which helps to bring prosperity in a country as a whole (Kaleem & Akhtar, 2020). According to Shukla & Singh (2022) elementary education serves as the foundational step in an individual's educational journey, just as one must learn to walk before they can run. According to RTE

act, 2009, elementary education is of eight years and encompasses primary (I-V) and upper primary (VI-VIII) catering to children between the ages of six to fourteen. The National Education Policy, 2020 gave the highest priority to the problem of elementary children dropping out of school and will adopt an array of meticulously formulated strategies based on micro-planning, and apply them at the grass-roots level all over the country.

Objectives of the Study: -

The following objectives were formulated as per the need of the study:

- To examine the overall trend in enrolment and gender differentials at the elementary level in India.
- To analyze the reading competencies of elementary students in India

Methodology: -

The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design to examine and explain the relationship between enrolment trends and reading skills among elementary students in India. The study is based on the analysis of secondary data gathered from different nationally recognized reports such as the report titled Women and Men in India released annually by the Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation (MoSPI) and Annual Status of Education Report (ASER). The publication Women and Men in India presents a comprehensive overview of the status of women and men in India through a compilation of selected indicators across key domains, including population, education, health, economic participation, decision-making, violence against women, and other gender-related issues, drawing upon inputs from various Ministries, Departments and organizations (PIB, 2026). The ASER is nationwide, citizen led household survey published by the NGO Pratham Foundation on learning outcomes of school students in rural India (PIB, 2024). The report tracks preschool and school enrolment, assess reading and arithmetic skill at elementary level. Beside these, relevant national & international publications, policy documents, journal articles, and government reports related to elementary education and learning outcomes in India has been used. The study covers data from 2014-2024 to identify trends in enrolment and reading achievement at elementary level. As the study is based entirely on publicly available secondary data, no direct human participation was involved. Proper citation and acknowledgment of all data sources and reports have been ensured during writing of this paper and the details of these have been included in reference section.

Overall trend in Enrolment with Gender differentials at elementary level

Primary (I-V) Level: -

The Adjusted Net Enrolment Ratio also called (ANER), is a refinement of Net Enrolment Ratio (NER) and is a critical indicator for measuring progress toward achieving universal school education. According to Mehta (n.d.) ANER provides a more accurate representation of school enrolment by accounting for age-specific enrolment rates and adjusting for students outside the official age range for a particular grade. ANER is widely recognised as a more robust measure for assessing educational access and equity. According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe; UNECE (2012), the Net enrolment is the ratio of the number of children of official school age who are enrolled in primary education to the total population of children of official School age, expressed as a percentage. ANER is calculated by using the following formula:

$$A - NER = \frac{\text{Number of children of official primary school age enrolled in primary or secondary education}}{\text{Population of the same age group}} * 100$$

Table 1: ANER at Primary Level 2014 -2024

Level	Gender	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Primary (I-V)	Boys	90.9	90.2	96.6	96.0	93.6	96.3	97.4	97.6	86.6	84.1
	Girls	93.2	92.9	97.1	96.8	95.0	98.4	99.9	100.0	92.0	88.0
	Total	92.0	91.5	96.8	96.4	94.3	97.3	98.6	99.1	89.1	85.9

Source: MOSPI <https://esankhyiki.mospi.gov.in>

From the table it is clear that a pattern emerges of overall improvement in enrolment between 2014–15 to 2021–22, followed by a noticeable decline in the subsequent years i.e. 2022–23 and 2023–24. The total ANER increased steadily from 92.0% (2014–15) to a peak of 99.1% (2021–22), indicating near-universal enrolment at the primary level during this period. This may be due to the positive impact of policy interventions such as RTE Act-2009 and other initiatives.

From a gender perspective, girls consistently show higher enrolment ratio than boys during 2014-15 to 2021-22. For instance, girls' ANER reached 100% in 2021–22, compared to 97.6% for boys due to gender-focused educational policies and schemes promoting girls' education. However, a sharp decline is observed after 2021–22 with reference to girls' enrolment dropped from 99.1% to 89.1% in 2022–23 and further to 85.9% in 2023–24. The decline in enrolment ratios during the last two years (2022-23 & 2023-24) raised concerns and demand to revisit the policy and schemes. In a nutshell, girls maintained a consistently higher enrolment ratio than boys during 2014-2024 and the gender gap remained relatively small in primary education. Further, during 2016–17 to 2021–22 a strong progress toward universal primary education has been seen. However, the decline after 2021–22 may indicate issues related to school closure during COVID-19 pandemic, educational disruptions, demographic adjustments, migration, or changes in data estimation methods.

Upper-primary (VI-VIII) Level:-

The data of table 2 reveals that in contrast to the primary level, a moderate enrolment with greater fluctuations and comparatively lower participation has been reported at the upper primary level. The total ANER at the upper primary level shows an irregular upward trend from 82.5% (2014–15) to a peak of 87.3% (2021–22) indicating gradual improvement in access and participation. However, this increase is not consistent, as evident from table, it declines (e.g., 78.4% in 2016–17 and 76.6% in 2018–19). This suggests that retention and transition from primary to upper primary remain persistent challenges across all years. This reflects continued progress toward gender equity and the effectiveness of initiatives promoting girls' education beyond the primary level. A sharp decline in enrolment has been reported after 2021–22, where the total ANER dropped from 87.3% to 77.8% in 2022–23 and further to 76.2% in 2023–24. The data also reported that India has noticeable progress towards enrolment especially at the level of upper primary and girls performed better than boys. However, the decline in enrolment for both boys and girls, indicating systemic disruptions rather than gender-specific issues. Possible reasons include post-pandemic effects, such as increased dropout rates, economic pressures, child labour, and reduced transition rates to higher grades.

Table 2: ANER at Upper Primary Level 2014 -2024

Level	Gender	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Upper Primary	Boys	79.0	80.3	79.3	80.1	77.6	80.9	84.0	87.0	76.2	74.9
	Girls	84.4	87.1	81.5	81.8	79.4	82.4	84.9	87.5	79.5	77.5
	Total	82.5	83.5	78.4	78.8	76.6	79.6	84.4	87.3	77.8	76.2

Source: MOSPI <https://esankhyiki.mospi.gov.in>

Elementary (I-VIII) level:-

In India, elementary education concludes with the completion of Class VIII, after which student's transition to secondary education (IX-XII). From the table 3, it is clear that a positive trend at elementary level has been recorded over the study period although fluctuations are recorded. The total ANER increased from 91.6% (2014–15) to 96.5% (2021–22), reflecting substantial progress toward Universal Elementary Education (UEE) in India. This rising trend may be due to various government initiatives for UEE. However, after attainment its peak in 2021–22, the total ANER declined sharply to 89.4% (2022–23) and further to 87.2% (2023–24).

Table 3: ANER at Elementary Level 2014-2024

Level	Gender	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Elementary (I-VIII)	Boys	89.8	90.0	93.1	92.8	91.4	93.6	95.1	95.6	87.5	85.9
	Girls	93.5	94.2	94.2	93.9	92.8	95.3	96.9	97.5	91.5	88.6
	Total	91.6	91.9	93.6	93.3	92.1	94.4	96.0	96.5	89.4	87.2

Source: MoSPI <https://esankhyiki.mospi.gov.in>

In terms of gender, girls' enrolment is consistently better than boys throughout the entire period. As table indicates that, in 2021–22, girls' ANER touched 97.5% which is slightly higher than boys at 95.6%. This indicates not only the achievement of gender parity but also a slight advantage in favour of girls, highlighting the success of targeted interventions such as scholarships, awareness campaigns, and girl-centric educational schemes. A significant decline has been recorded just after 2021-22 where the total ANER dropped from 96.5.3% in 2021-22 to 87.2% in 2023–24. This downward trend has been noted for both boys and girls, indicating systemic disruptions rather than gender-specific issues.

Reading Skill among Elementary Students in India:-

While India has achieved notable advancements in overall literacy (98.1%) and has also achieved UEE (ASER, 2024; MoSPI, 2024). This means access is no longer the issue in India, but the quality matters. The documents of ASER during 2010-2024 revealed a troubling trend in reading proficiency levels at elementary. Banerji & Chavan (2016 & 2019) mentioned that quality of early education is still a big challenge particularly at primary level.

Table 4: Percentage of Children in Std. V who can read Std. II level text (2010-2024)

Year	Government School	Private School	Govt. & Private Schools
2010	50.7	64.2	53.7
2012	41.7	61.2	46.9
2014	42.2	62.6	48.0
2016	41.6	63.0	47.9
2018	44.2	65.1	50.5
2022	38.5	56.8	42.8
2024	44.8	59.3	48.8
Average %	43.38	61.7	48.37

Source: ASER <https://asercentre.org/> (2010-2024)

A survey report of ASER during the years 2016-2024 reported that, despite several years of schooling, a significant number of children fail to acquire essential foundational skills in a timely manner. Only half of all V Std. students are able to read simple texts intended for II Std. students. The table and figure (Figure 1) indicates that a large proportion of students are still unable to read basic text. Further, data from 2010 to 2024 indicates a concerning situation. Proficiency in reading has significantly declined, dropping from 50.7 per cent in 2010 to 38.5 per cent in 2022 in government schools and from 64.2 per cent in 2010 to 56.8 per cent in 2022 in Private schools. Overall, the combined reading proficiency for both government and private schools fell from 53.7 per cent in 2010 to 42.8 per cent in 2022; overall, there is a declining trend.

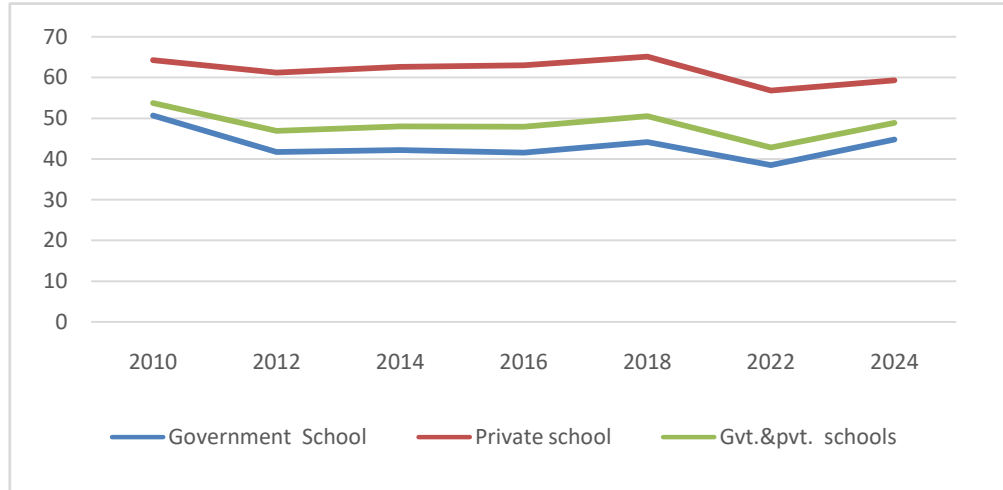


Figure 1: Percentage of Children in Std. V who can read Std. II level text (2010-2024)

Source: ASER <https://asercentre.org/> (2010-2024)

The most notable decreases occurred between 2010 & 2012 and 2018 & 2022. Between the years 2010 and 2012, government schools experienced a decline of 9%, while private schools show a decrease of 3%. Overall, its reduction of 6.8%. Similarly, from 2018 to 2022, government schools recorded a decline of 5.7% and private schools fell by 8.3%, resulting in an overall decrease of 7.4%, reflecting the impact of recent challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Survey reveals a consistent declining trend in both government and private schools from 2010 to 2022. Despite this decline, private schools have consistently outperformed government schools. However, there is a notable increase observed after 2022. For example, in government schools, reading levels surged by 44.8 per cent in 2024, up from 38.5 per cent in 2022. Similarly, private schools experienced a rise from 56.8 per cent to 59.3 per cent, while the overall increase was from 42.8 to 48.8 per cent. These improvements reflect the positive impact of government initiatives and efforts. At the higher stage (Std. VIII), reading proficiency is unsatisfactory, as a large proportion of students are unable to read the text of Std. II level.

Data reveals that in 2010, 82% of students were able to read at the standard II Level text in government schools which dropped significantly to 66.2% in 2022. In private schools, the percentage of proficient readers decreased from 87.5% in 2010 to 80.0% in 2022. The sharpest decline can be seen between 2010 and 2014. Overall, in Government and Private Schools proficiency level fell from 83.5 per cent in 2010 to 69.6 per cent in 2022.

Table 5: Trends over time of Children in Std. VIII who can read Std. II Level Text

Year	Government School	Private School	Govt. & Private Schools
2010	82.0	87.5	83.5
2012	73.4	84.2	76.5
2014	71.5	82.4	74.5
2016	70.0	81.4	73.1
2018	69.0	82.9	73.0
2022	66.2	80.0	69.6
2024	67.5	80.0	71.1

Source: ASER <https://asercentre.org/> (2010-2024)

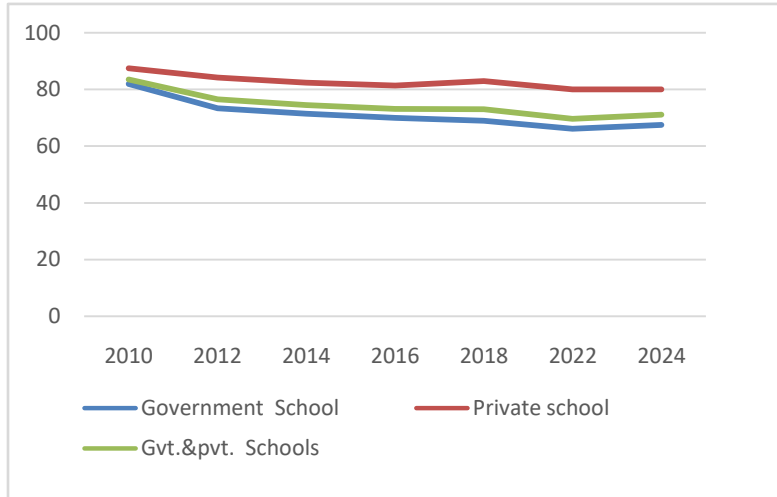


Figure 2: Percentage of Children in Std. VIII who can read Std. II level text

Source: ASER <https://asercentre.org/> (2010-2024)

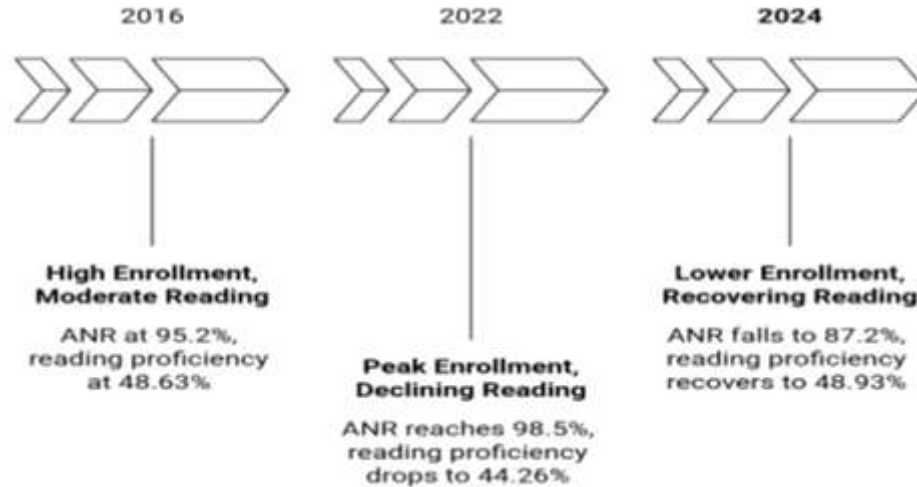
The graph clearly illustrates that there is a consistent decline in the reading ability percentages across all school types. The combined performance of Govt. & Private Schools shows a similar decline, aligning closely with the trend in Government Schools. However, from 2022 to 2024, there is an upward trend in the per cent age of students who can read Std. II level text

Table 6: Comparison between ANR and Students who can read Std II level text at different Std.

Year	ANR at the Elementary Level	Percentage of Children who can read Std. II level text at different Stds.			Total
		III	V	VIII	
2016	93.6	25.1	47.8	73.0	48.63
2018	92.1	27.2	50.3	72.0	49.83
2022	98.5	20.5	42.8	69.5	44.26
2024	87.2	27.0	48.7	71.1	48.93

Source:MoSPI<https://esankhyiki.mospi.gov.in>ASER <https://asercentre.org/>2016- 2024

With a peak of 98.5% in 2022, the ANR remains relatively high across all observed years, indicating that accessibility in elementary education has substantially improved. But there is a lack of correspondence between the improvement in enrolment and the improvement in reading competencies. It is evident from the above table that despite the highest ANR recorded in 2022, the reading ability across all grade levels (III: 20.5%, V: 42.8%, VIII: 69.5%) shows a marked decline compared to previous years. This indicates that greater participation in schooling does not necessarily lead to corresponding improvements in reading literacy skills. However, as grades increase, the learning gradient improves with reading proficiency, but overall learning percentages remain suboptimal

Figure 3 Trend in ANER and Reading Literacy at Elementary Education

At the primary level (Std. III), only one-third of students shows the ability to read a Std. II-level text in most of the years, expected to be proficient by the completion of std. III as per the National Education Policy, 2020. This raises concerns about the effectiveness of early grade instruction and the acquisition of foundational literacy skills. The fluctuation in total reading percentages from 48.63% (2016) to 44.26% (2022) and a slight recovery to 48.93% (2024) shows that stagnation rather than sustained improvement in learning outcomes over time. The decline observed in 2022 may also be interrupted schooling, possibly due to COVID-19 pandemic. The data of 2024 shows a trivial recovery in reading skills across all grades, despite a noticeable decline in ANER to 87.2%. This inverse pattern suggests that factors like quality of instruction, learning recovery programs etc. play a vital role in influencing student learning outcomes.

Conclusion:-

Elementary education is one of the most important catalysts for the social and economic progress of a nation. The development of a child into a democratic citizen is dependent on the quality of elementary education. Quality elementary education expands the scope of an individual's development, especially in terms of acquisition of skills and employability; leading to enhancement of her/his efficiency and overall quality of life. Further, elementary education is very important for our country because only a literate population can actively contribute to nation-building through rational thinking and reinforcement of democratic values. India has made considerable progress toward UEE by 2021–22 with gender equity in enrolment.

However, the fluctuations in enrolment ratios over the years is alarming. Despite notable progress in enrolment and gender parity at primary and upper primary level, quality learning is still a big challenge. The ASER suggests that a considerable number of elementary students are still unable to read Std. II-level text. The findings of the study highlighted that focus on foundational skill especially reading skill is a dire need of hour. Hence, urgent shift from quantitative (enrolment) to qualitative (foundational literacy and numeracy) at the early stages of schooling is needed. The study reveals that a determined and gradual decline in reading skill over the years in both government and private schools, despite the fact that private schools steadily outperformed government schools in all years. Private schools have a higher percentage of proficient readers than government schools, with a gap of approximately 13.8% in 2022. One possible contributing factor is that government schools may lack adequate physical and human resources as compared to private schools. Gouda (2013) argued that private primary schools perform better with reference to physical infrastructure and schooling costs to government primary schools in India.

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