

Ensuring Equity in Indian Educational Progress

Mains: GS II -Education

Why in News?

The Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+) 2025-26 report highlights notable progress in India's school education system, covering 1.47 million schools, 240 million students, and 10.2 million teachers.

What is the status of Indian educational progress?

- **Significant progress** - Over the years, India has made significant progress in expanding school access, improving enrolment, reducing dropout rates, strengthening infrastructure and increasing teacher availability.
- **UDISE+ Report** - The UDISE+ 2025-26 report captures this progress across nearly 1.47 million schools, 240 million students and 10.2 million teachers.

Education is central to India's social transformation, economic mobility and demographic potential.

- The UDISE+ data indicate improvements in several key areas of school education.
- Gross enrolment, student retention, infrastructure and teacher availability have generally improved over time, while dropout rates have declined in many parts of the country.
- **Gender participation** - The Gender Parity Index (GPI) indicates that girls' enrolment and participation are higher than boys' across most States and Union Territories.
- This reflects the impact of sustained policy interventions promoting girls' education.
- **Infrastructural development** - Infrastructure has also expanded, particularly in areas such as electricity and drinking-water availability.
- These improvements demonstrate that India has made considerable progress in building the basic foundations of universal schooling.

What are the challenges?

- **Regional and Social Disparities** - Educational opportunities remain uneven across States and social groups.
- Differences in Gross Enrolment Ratios (GER), dropout rates, pupil-teacher ratios (PTR), school size and infrastructure demonstrate the unequal distribution of educational opportunities.

- For instance, the GER varies substantially across pedagogical stages and regions.
- Meghalaya records a very high Foundational GER, while Bihar records a substantially lower figure.
- At the secondary level, Chandigarh records a GER above 100, whereas Bihar records one of the lowest rates.
- Such variations point towards differences in access, retention and transition across educational stages.
- **Social inequalities** – The national distribution of enrolment across social groups does not necessarily correspond to their demographic share, indicating continuing differences in participation.
- Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), minorities and economically disadvantaged households can face multiple barriers to enrolment and completion.
- **Geographical locational issues** – Children living in tribal, hilly, border and remote areas often have to travel greater distances to reach schools and may face inadequate transport facilities.
- Districts in Uttarakhand, Odisha, Jammu and Kashmir and Maharashtra illustrate the continuing difficulties faced by students in geographically challenging areas.
- **The Problem of Dropouts and Educational Transitions** – Access to primary schooling has improved, but ensuring retention and transition to higher levels of education remains a challenge.
- The dropout rates reported by UDISE+ vary considerably across States and educational stages.
- Bihar records high preparatory and middle-stage dropout rates, while Ladakh records a particularly high secondary dropout rate.
- Such disparities indicate that children may enter the education system but struggle to remain in it as educational demands increase.
- The transition from elementary to secondary education is particularly important.
- Adolescents may leave school because of poverty, household responsibilities, inadequate transport, social pressures, early marriage, the need to work or the perceived low returns from education.
- Therefore, policies must move beyond enrolment targets and focus on retention, transition and completion.
- **Teacher Availability and Unequal Learning Conditions** – Teachers are among the most important determinants of educational quality.
- However, teacher availability remains uneven across the country.
- The Pupil-Teacher Ratio (PTR) varies significantly between States and across pedagogical stages.
- Jharkhand records a particularly high secondary PTR, indicating considerable pressure on teachers.
- High PTRs can reduce individual attention, weaken classroom interaction and adversely affect learning outcomes.
- The problem is especially acute in rural and remote schools, where teachers may have to handle multiple classes and subjects while also undertaking non-teaching responsibilities assigned by governments.
- Thus, the challenge is not merely to increase the number of teachers but to ensure their equitable deployment.
- Incentives for serving in difficult areas, rational teacher transfers, local recruitment

and greater administrative support can help address regional shortages.

- **Infrastructure bottlenecks** – Physical infrastructure has improved, but significant regional disparities remain.
- Schools in educationally backward and remote districts may continue to lack adequate classrooms, laboratories, libraries, sanitation facilities, digital resources and other learning infrastructure.
- **Digital divide** – Access to computers, internet connectivity and digital learning resources is not uniform across States, schools and households.
- Technology can democratise education, but without equitable access it can instead deepen existing inequalities.
- **Children with disabilities** – Accessible classrooms, ramps, toilets, learning materials, assistive technologies and trained teachers are essential for meaningful inclusion.
- Inclusion must therefore be understood not simply as school admission but as the ability to participate, learn and complete education with dignity.

What could be done?

- **Targeted public investment** – Public investment should be targeted towards educationally deprived districts, tribal regions, aspirational districts and remote areas.
- Resource allocation must recognise that equal expenditure does not necessarily produce equal outcomes.
- **Equitable teacher deployment** – Difficult-area allowances, housing facilities, professional support and technology-enabled teaching can make remote postings more sustainable.
- **Inclusive Infrastructure** – School infrastructure should be assessed through an inclusion lens.
- Every school should progressively provide accessible classrooms, sanitation, drinking water, electricity, digital connectivity and facilities for children with disabilities.
- **Preventing Dropout** – Scholarships, transport facilities, residential schools where appropriate, nutritional support and counselling can reduce the economic and social pressures that push vulnerable children out of school.
- **Complementing Digital Education** – Fifth, digital education should complement rather than replace classroom learning.
- Investment in connectivity, devices, digital content and teacher training must prioritise disadvantaged communities.
- **Outcome-Oriented Educational Governance** – Enrolment figures alone cannot adequately measure educational progress.
- Learning outcomes, attendance, transition rates, completion, inclusion and student well-being should receive equal attention.
- **Aligning with NEP 2020** – The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 places considerable emphasis on equity, inclusion, foundational learning and universal access.
- Its vision can provide the framework for addressing the disparities highlighted by UDISE+.
- The focus should be on “leaving no child behind” by identifying educationally disadvantaged groups and regions and designing interventions according to their specific needs.

- Convergence between education, nutrition, health, transport and social welfare programmes can address the multiple disadvantages affecting vulnerable children.

What lies ahead?

- India's next phase of educational reform must therefore shift from expansion to equity, from enrolment to learning, and from access to meaningful inclusion.
- Targeted investment, equitable teacher deployment, inclusive infrastructure, stronger social protection and improved digital access can bridge persistent gaps.
- Ultimately, India's educational progress will be meaningful only when a child's social background, gender, disability or geographical location no longer determines the quality of education available to them.
- An education system that combines quality with equity and accessibility will not only fulfil the constitutional promise of equality but also strengthen India's human capital and long-term social and economic development.

Reference

[The Hindu| UDISE+ Report](#)

