

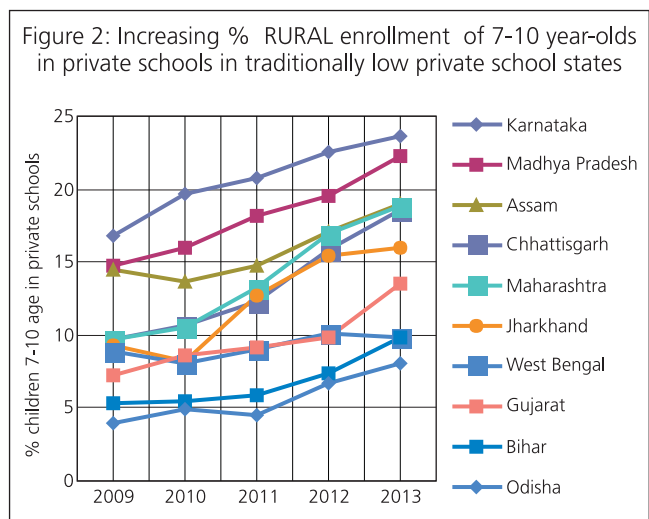
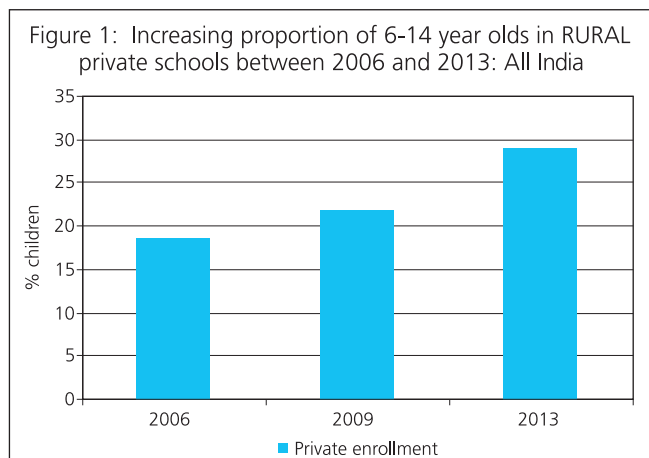
Old challenges for a new generation

Madhav Chavan, CEO-President, Pratham Education Foundation

The nine ASER surveys since 2005 cover almost two complete terms of the Indian Parliament and of most state governments. The first term of the Indian Parliament was impacted by the imposition of 2% cess for elementary education that made available substantial funds from the union government for elementary education. The main feature of the second term has been the Right to Education Act. The highlight of the first term was the increase in enrollment of children from about 92% to 96%. In the second term, the main story is that school facilities are showing some improvements thanks to the focus on infrastructure. However, in spite of these improvements, the issues of quality of learning have remained largely neglected over the last nine years.

What will the next term of the Parliament and state legislatures bring? There are several major challenges for the education sector: from introducing at least one year of pre-school education to building mechanisms for open learning, continuing education, vocational training, and quality education and research at the university level. All these challenges are interconnected yet very different in character. Yet, it has to be acknowledged that a good foundation of elementary education holds the key to building a much stronger education sector in India. Political decisions are needed to address problems and they need to take into account the overall changing realities of India.

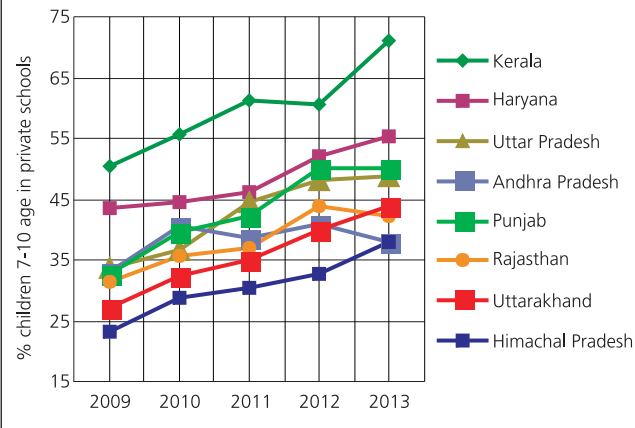
Among others, ASER surveys highlight two major issues that need to be addressed urgently. First, the dramatic shift to private school enrollment in rural areas. It is a development that demands a new approach to how our education is organized. The second issue is the crisis of learning. It affects both government and private schools where large numbers of low income families send their children. This crisis of learning simultaneously threatens the economy of the country and the future of millions of children and youth.



To a large extent, the Right to Education Act reflects the ideals of India from the 1950's and 60's. Even without the Act or any special funds provision from the Government of India, the elementary school system was expanding slowly for several decades. It is no accident that by 2005 over 92% children were enrolled in schools. But something else had begun to change. When ASER started measuring enrollment in 2005, the all India rural private primary school enrollment was about 17%. ASER seems to have caught a big change in its early stages - rural private school enrollment rose to 29% by 2013. Ironically, after the Indian Parliament declared that it would provide free and compulsory education to all children, the pace of enrollment in private schools quickened.

There are at least three clear factors contributing to this change. The first is growing urbanization. This does not only mean migration to urban areas. It also means increasing urban influence on the entire population leading to greater educational aspirations. Second is the increased wealth and access to the external world and information. ASER 2013 indicates that nearly 70% rural households have at least one mobile phone. We also find that although the proportion of families owning a TV has not changed much over the past five years (54% in 2013), the proportion of those among TV owners who have access to cable TV has gone up from 36% in 2010 to 79% in 2013. That is, nearly 43% of all rural households have cable or direct to home TV. Half of these families send their children to government schools today and may shift to private schools if they become accessible. On top of it we have a clear failure of government schools to deliver on even basic achievements in learning.

Figure 3: Increasing % RURAL enrollment of 7-10 year-olds in private schools in traditionally high private school states



Governments' policies and plans are still centered around villages and rural areas. Plans for provision of education assume an all-pervasive governmental school system. There is a need to urgently deal with growing urbanization and the trend of enrollment in private schools in urban and rural areas. Banning private schools or even curtailing them is no more a democratic option unless a visibly better government school alternative can be presented. By introducing 25% reservation for economically weaker sections, the Right to Education Act has in fact opened the door for unaided schools being aided by the government. There is no reason why government-aided and privately managed schools cannot be encouraged further. The segregation of children, even among the poorer sections, into those who go to government schools and those who attend private schools is socially undesirable and the option of government-aided and privately managed schools which function autonomously can in fact help create schools where all children can go to school together.

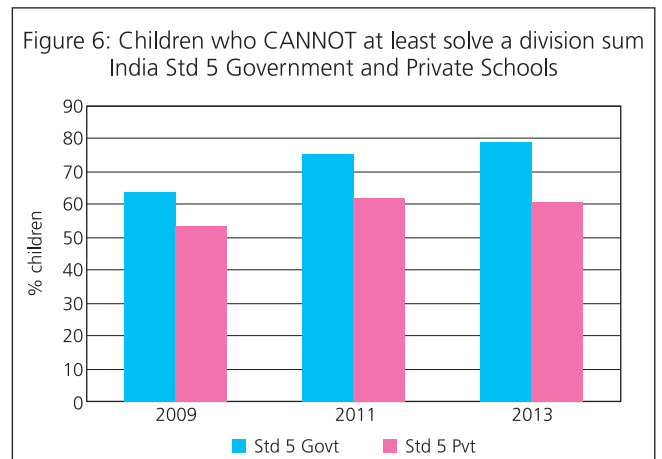
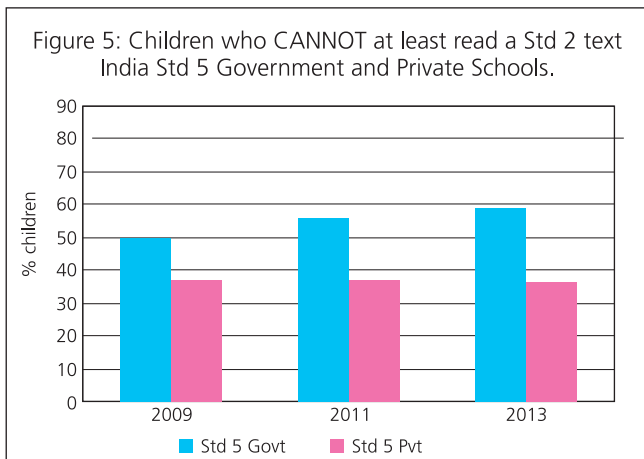
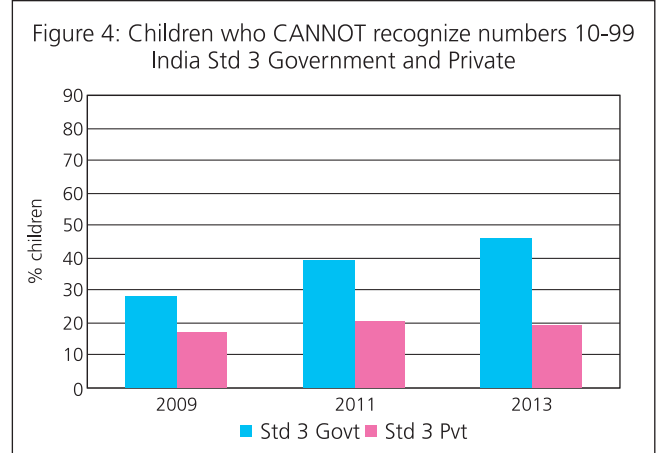
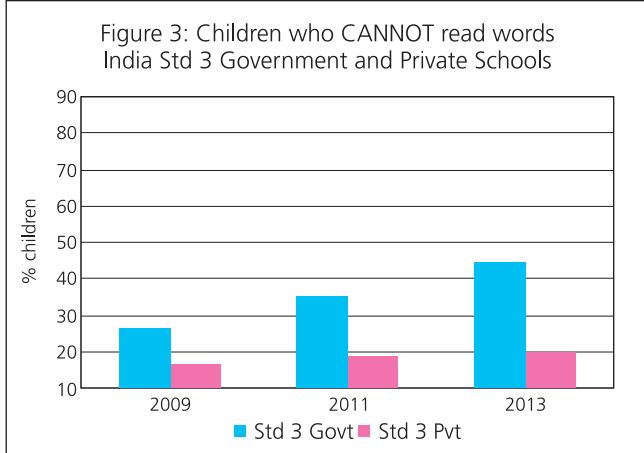
States where nearly half the rural population and considerably larger urban population send their children to private schools could lead the way in this matter.

The second issue is related to what children learn in schools and how to measure what they learn. Over the last couple of years, international and national attention has begun to shift from being input focused to learning outcome oriented. There is no question that schools need to have good infrastructure, but to keep achievement of quality on hold until all infrastructure is taken care of is quite absurd. Discussions being held at different international platforms suggest that the next Millennium Development Goals for education will be much more focused on measurable learning outcomes. In India, the 12th Plan adopted in December 2012 attempts to give a learning outcome orientation to the education sector. For a while, there has been growing consensus that quality of education has to be the focus of education. The question always was; how? The dominant thinking in the education establishment for the last decade has been that if we do more of what we have been doing and do it better, quality of education will improve. ASER maintains that learning outcomes, especially in the government schools in most states, are poorer today than they were a few years ago. The data of 2013 further confirms the decline we observed over the last three years regardless what the official response to our report is.

After ASER 2012 was released in January 2013, as many as 15 MPs asked questions in the January-February session of the Parliament about the decline in learning levels since 2009-10 as reported by ASER. We have printed one of the questions and a Minister's response to it at the end of this section. We have also printed a detailed comparison of ASER and NCERT's National Achievement Surveys. We find the response from MHRD to questions in Parliament unacceptable, even bordering on misleading the house on facts. There have been three surveys of Std 5, two of which were held in 2001-02 and 2005-06, several years before ASER noted a decline in learning levels. The third survey which was conducted in 2010-11 was based on a new methodology for data analysis. By NCERT's own statement in the report published in 2012, its results are not comparable with previous surveys. However, they seem to have somehow come up with results that show improvement. We find it interesting that in this latest survey Uttar Pradesh government schools have scored the highest in the country by a wide margin, using what NCERT claims to be 'rigorous' and 'detailed' methods as compared to ASER's.

The unwillingness to admit that there is a problem is not helpful. The problem won't go away. It will only get worse.

Widening gap



These figures tell the story of a widening gap in rural India. ASER has not been monitoring urban areas but there is no reason to believe that the picture is any different in urban India either. Over the past few years, some state governments have been monitoring learning levels using simple assessments of their own. These reports are not publicized but in informal exchanges various state officials do say that their findings are not too different from what ASER states. In fact, several states are initiating learning improvement programs once again thanks to their own assessments. The initiative from the Planning Commission has clearly helped.

There is some good news from the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan too. The SSA has started telling the states that essential learning outcomes have to be taken care of, especially in reading and math. Words like "assessment", "measurable outcomes" which were taboo for many years have appeared in the latest SSA documents. The intent clearly appears to be good but the instructions are confusing thanks to the requirements of the Right to Education Act. A Mission to improve learning is needed but it is not possible if simple clear goals to be achieved are not enunciated.

There are two major obstacles created by RTE. First is the teachers' duty to complete the grade-level syllabus within the year. Second, children are to be placed in grades or standards according to their age. In a country where more than 60% government schools have multi-grade, multi-level classes, and where more than 50% lag at least two years behind if not more in terms of basic learning competencies, how is the teacher supposed to 'complete the syllabus'? The teacher is also supposed to individually assess each child and ensure that she/he comes up to the grade level. SSA instructions recently sent out try to balance both these factors while also attempting to emphasize that defining measurable learning outcomes and planning to achieve them is a must. We are hoping that the states will clearly define their priorities and plan their actions. After all it is the states that have to run the schools.

It is essential that we get rid of, or at least stop emphasizing, the grade-wise syllabus at least up to Std 5. It should be replaced with stage-wise sets of learning achievement goals which recognize that if children are going to learn at their own pace it is unrealistic for a teacher to 'complete a syllabus' and have children attain their grade-level competencies within that year. Focusing on defined learning outcomes by the end of the current Std 2 and current Std 5 is necessary. Syllabi, school time-tables, textbooks all need to be reoriented to achieve basic reading with comprehension, writing with thinking, math with problem solving abilities.

This brings us to the issue of how to measure children's progress. The SSA started conducting sample based Achievement Surveys since 2001. These are pen and paper tests which require Std 3 and 5 children to read and respond to questions. In a country where nearly 65% children in Std 3 and 35% children in Std 5 in government schools struggle to even read words, how can pen and paper tests be justified? The so-called reading comprehension test conducted by NCERT actually does not check whether a child can read fluently or can read at all. In fact, NCERT has no test to check if and how well children can read.

ASER introduced a new element in education assessment internationally by using a simple, oral method of home-based assessment of reading and math done one on one with children. The end result is easy to understand and can be communicated transparently whether in a national sample survey or in a simple village census. Another method - EGRA (Early Grade Reading Assessment- developed by RTI in the US) is also an oral method that can transparently report to parents and lay persons whether the child is reading well or not. These innovations are a big departure from the pen and paper tests that are complex, difficult to administer, and whose reports make sense only to experts and not to lay persons.

At this moment the governmental system relies on a dysfunctional Continuous Comprehensive Evaluation process in schools, periodic sampled Achievement Surveys (every three years), and possibly Std 10 examinations to assess quality of learning achievements. Although the government will defend all three, as any system would, in reality none of these actually give reliable information on what children have learned. There is a need to take a close look to make the reporting system more transparent and more reliable and the data more useful/useable.

First, there is a need to rework and simplify the so-called CCE into a system of systematic monitoring of attainment of basic learning outcomes coupled with regular programs to raise the basic learning outcomes instead of insisting on "completion of syllabus", which is often equated with textbook content to be crammed. Second, the so-called achievement surveys with pen and paper test should be targeted at Std 8 rather than Std 3 or 5 to get any meaningful results, at least until we know that most children in every state can read well.

One big need of the country is standardized assessments of different skills and subjects that are textbook independent and that can be taken by anyone at any time of the year. This will set the standards of basic skills of learning that children need to achieve. The RTE is against all Board examinations to be held before Std 8. But that does not mean children should not be able to voluntarily check their skills as they study. The present Std 10 Board examinations have lost all value and there is a need to reform the examination system completely.

There is a lot more to be done beyond elementary education. Every stage of education needs a relook and reform. Unfortunately, the political leaders are not engaged enough with issues of the future which is already upon us. It will not do to leave decision-making to educationists and bureaucrats. Systems will not reform themselves. Perhaps developments like increasing enrollment in private schools will creep up on the system from outside and force it to change. One thing is clear, the status quo is not good and it will not sustain.

One way or another, a new breed of political leaders is going to take over India in the next decade. Informed judgments will be needed if decisive changes are to be made. But it remains to be seen whether the new generation of political leaders will bring a new outlook, energy, and dedication to education or whether they will continue to run on the old tracks.