



WEATHER

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# FREE SCHOOL

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Quality at Value

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THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Education is the movement from darkness to light.

Allan Bloom

International Day of Education  
SPECIAL EDITION

Children are the future of our country. But what about the future of our children? The only way to secure their future and that of the nation is by providing free education to those who need it. Our special Free School edition is a step in that direction. Through it, we want to find possible solutions to improve the quality of this education, ensure better infrastructure and raise the standards of teaching.

Amitabh Behar  
CEO, Oxfam India

## Education for India's latter day Eklavyas

Only 12.7% elementary schools in India comply with the minimum quality norms of the RTE Act. While nothing is more important to ensuring quality education than the availability of adequate number of professionally qualified, trained and motivated teachers, a third of India's schools (34.4%) lack the statutory number of teachers and a fifth (18.5%) of all teachers lack professional qualifications.

Ironically, while India's poor struggle to access the minimum quality of education, nine Indian billionaires own as much as the bottom 50%. In an economy reeling from a slowdown, most of the growth is being appropriated by the top 1%. On last count, the wealth of India's billionaires is more than India's national budget. More can be done to redistribute this wealth to ensure that India's super-rich pay their fair share of taxes to contribute to national development.

At the heart of the problem is the fact that while billionaire wealth soars, education suffers from chronic underfunding or being outsourced to private companies that exclude the poorest people. More funds are needed to train and hire qualified teachers, ensure that schools are well-run, that there are sufficient teaching and learning materials, and adequate infrastructure. While marginalised social groups such as Dalits, Adivasis and Muslims are overwhelmingly dependent on public education, government funding for its own schools has remained woefully inadequate.

India's spending on education has hovered at under 4%, despite successive governments' electoral commitment to spending 6% of its GDP on education. While the draft New National Education Policy commits India to spending 20% of the budget on education, recent news suggests that a cut of 3,000 crore is anticipated in this year's budget, instead of a much-needed and anticipated increase. Quality inputs are needed to improve quality of education and this cannot happen without a significant increase in investment.

India's chronic financial neglect of the education sector is in sharp contrast to countries at a comparable level of development which have written financial commitments to education into law. Thus, Brazil's constitution binds the Union to spend no less than 18% of its budget on education; Argentina and Mexico's RTE leg-



islation explicitly bind these governments to invest 6% and 8% GDP on education. Constitutions of Philippines and Vietnam provide that the State shall give priority to investments in education. A similar level of commitment is missing in India. This historic failure in turn results in chronic neglect of quality. Research suggests that quality depends on the availability of good teachers, of good curricula plus teaching and learning materials, and the development of appropriate, formative assessment. This includes timely provision of sufficient quality textbooks — which must be relevant — as well as other teaching and learning material.

In contrast, India's textbooks arrive chronically late, if at all. For example, it is now over two years since the distribution of textbooks in government schools has been effectively halted, replaced with the transfer of funds to parental bank accounts. In the absence of books in the market to purchase with said funds, this means students spend a substantial part of the academic calendar without textbooks. Unsurprisingly, in the absence of print material in classrooms, reading levels are low.

What is particularly troubling, but perhaps not surprising, is the fact that this state of affairs is considered normal. India fails to ensure a universal system of schooling where all public schools are of a comparable standard. What India's poor and marginalized need is policies to address the known barriers to school par-

ticipation — abolition of school fees (especially at secondary level), attention to maintaining geographical distance (not closing low enrolment schools in remote tribal and Adivasi inhabited areas), and steps to address physical, financial, linguistic or communication-related barriers. Addressing these will also require, for example, appropriate teacher training, after-school support, multi-lingual intervention programmes, disability-specific accommodations and other interventions needed to level the playing field. It is important to focus on equity not just in relation to access, but also in relation to quality to ensure the best quality of teaching and learning, including incentives for teachers and inclusive teacher recruitment policies.

Instead, the government itself discriminates against poor children. The per child unit cost in government-run Kendriya Vidyalaya schools for Central Government employees in transferable jobs is Rs 27,000 per child, compared to Rs 7,613 and Rs 9,583 per child average cost in government schools of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar respectively. It is time that the government took action to ensure India's Eklavyas studying in India's government schools are no longer deprived of the same quality of education as India's gilded elites. Only when India invests in the development of each child, irrespective of her caste, class and creed, will the government's vision of realising the right to education for all be realised.

Oxfam is a confederation of 19 independent charitable organizations focusing on the alleviation of global poverty, founded in 1942 and led by Oxfam International. It is a major non-profit group with an extensive collection of operations.



Education • Innovation • Transformation

## Need to improve quality of education in schools

FPJ NEWS SERVICE

Quality Education is the first step towards the growth of a child and the nation. With 28 crore students and 14 lakh schools in India, it is one of the biggest sectors with very limited transformational stakeholders. Education has regained its focus and acknowledgement as one of the significant ingredients leading to global transformation. Quality education has also been recognized as one of the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals by UNESCO. Right to education is a fundamental right and quality education would help liberate from the shackles of poverty and would transform lives.

India has made significant progress in universalising primary education since 1990s. The GER (Gross Enrolment Ratio) has improved at all the levels and several

policy interventions and flagship programmes of Government like Mid Day Meals and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan have helped improving access and improving quality of education at schools. Setting up of Institutions of National importance and national rankings have further improved the quality of education at the higher education level. Recruitment of teachers is an area which still requires an impetus at both primary and higher education. Online Testing and Assessment Services which include solutions like multi centre online exams can help in resolution of this problem in minimum time.

Recent launch of "Study in India programme" has also opened Indian educational institutions for foreign students who can study at quality educational institutions in India. This has further made Institutions to work harder on improving their standards so that they can become a partner under the programme. For the first time, a transactional portal called [www.studyinindia.gov.in](http://www.studyinindia.gov.in) has been made operational for foreign students, which coupled with systematic branding and social media activities could reach to 4 crores people in 195 countries during the admission year 2019. The programme is being implemented by EdCIL (India) Limited.

Focus of Government on Digital India has opened new avenues both for the students and service providers who are continuously improving on existing solutions, trying to bring innovation through artificial intelligence and bringing in low cost, low power models. Adding to the limited infrastructure and availability few specialized Government institutions coupled with Digital solutions can increase the reach of quality education to masses and add to liberate them.

EdCIL India Limited a Miniratna Category-I CPSE under MHRD, can provide solutions for teachers recruitment, digital education, infrastructure for government institutions and other allied educational services.



"Quality education for all is the first step towards equal opportunity for all."

MILIND SOMAN,  
actor & entrepreneurShaheen Mistri  
Founder and CEO, Teach For India

## The grey, and the sunshine of education

Here is the truth as I have seen it. The vast majority of Indian children do not reach their potential. By grade 3, over 75% of children already face a learning gap. In grade 5, more than half our children can't do basic division, or read a grade 3 text. Less than a third of children who start school will actually graduate from college. For rural, Muslim girls, only 3% make it to college today.

At Teach For India, we call this the Grey of the Education System.

The truth is, across the education system there is brokenness. We aren't attracting our top talent into education. For those who choose to be a teacher, our teacher training institutes are largely sub-quality. Our school leaders are usually veteran teachers who don't have the skills or training to effectively lead schools. Once in school, our teachers and leaders lack autonomy and are often burdened with a range of non-teaching tasks. Our curriculum doesn't embed the 21st century skills needed to prepare our kids for the present, and future. Our teaching methodology is largely rote. Our examination system does not test understanding or measure holistic outcomes. Across the country today kids are often unsafe. And power is in the hands of adults and not shared with children.

I have seen a school of 1000 children where all the teachers in the school sit in the sun, sipping chai, while the kids run around all day. I have seen inspiring quotes written in beautiful cursive on a blackboard only to see mindless copying from the board in class. I have seen kids get whacked across the wrist, hand, back, legs, face with belts, sticks or a hard hand.

I have seen too much Grey; there is a lot to be fixed. At Teach For India we strive for the Sunshine. And there is lots of hope across India.

Thanks to tools like ASER, and policies like the Right to Education and the National Education Policy, there is increased awareness and acceptance

that the system needs to change. There is a growing openness to work together — government, NGOs, civic society — to bring about that change. There is a rising sense of empowerment in students that is making them stand up for what they believe is right. There are classrooms and schools that are showing us that a new type of education — one that can make the world better — is possible. There is the potential of what technology can do for education. And perhaps most significantly, there are driven, passionate people who are choosing to be in education.

I have seen teachers with unthinkable dedication and courage — who have set up girl's football teams, fasted with their children to show them that fasting and studying are both possible, who hand out their phone numbers so that kids can call them at night with homework queries, who spend endless hours just listening to the many challenges that their students' face. I have seen students, as young as ten, facilitating study centers for younger children, lobbying the government to clear the dumping ground near their home, setting up a healthy food business to stop junk food being sold at their school door. I have seen a group of children study the preamble of the constitution to deeply understand the meaning of the word fraternity, and then champion an approach of love by holding safe circles across cities for people to come together and discuss democracy. I have seen such potential in children given opportunity. So much that I actually published a book, Grey Sunshine.

Thirty years into this work, I ask, with all the grey, what will best bring the sunshine?

While much has been written about — a focus on early childhood, teacher training, technology in education, a focus on gender — here are my top 5 bets.

### #1 Widen the purpose of education

Until we expand the purpose of education from rote-based, academic examinations leading to competition from a job, we don't have a real starting point for change. We know today that education is much more — that it must be holistic, infused with the 21st century skills and mindsets that all children need. And we need to test for that. Unless we change what we measure, we won't really shift the system.

### #2 Make learning safe

Not enough is written about all the many factors that stop a child from being ready to really learn. We need to listen to the diverse challenges our children face — both at home and in school — that range from bullying to anxiety to abuse — and create safe spaces in our schools for children where they can voice their opinions and be accepted for who they are. We need to focus on relationships of belief and love so that no child ever feels they are alone in dealing with the many ups and downs of life. We need to make schools safe spaces not just for children, but for teachers and staff too. If everyone felt valued, and loved and supported, our schools would be very different places.

### #3 Reimagine the role of kids in education

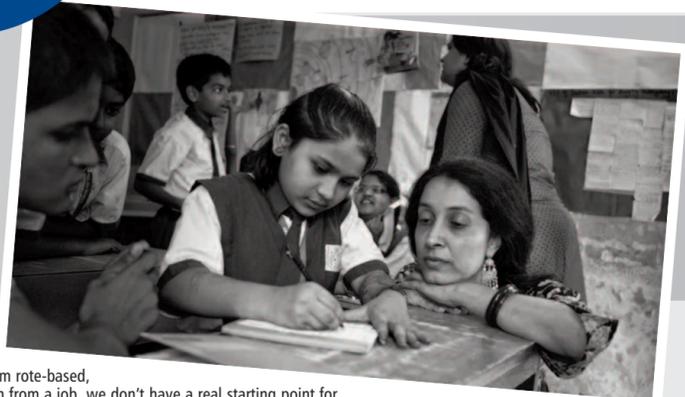
If you look at the scale of the problem in our country, it's simply not going to be enough if only adults — teachers, policymakers, school leaders — are involved in changing things. We need to stop seeing students as this mass of 300-odd million kids that need to be educated and start seeing them as partners in driving their own learning and that of other children. We need to create opportunities for them to learn from each other in class, sit on school governance committees, be an integral voice in policies impacting education and children.

### #4 Make education about changing the world, gently, and with love

We need to give our student opportunities to learn through making the world better. Imagine students working on problems and projects they choose and really care about and building knowledge, skills and mindsets through the solving of these problems. Imagine students shifting things by small, consistent, everyday actions of love. Imagine what the world would be like for all of us if everyone practiced kindness, care, understanding, listening, accepting, embracing diversity.

### #5 Bring the most passionate and skilled people into education

We must give paramount importance to finding ways to attract and retain enough passionate and skilled people at all levels of the education system. If we do this, everything else will improve. If we do not, we run the risk of throwing countless resources at band-aid solutions that will not sustain the test of time. I imagine an India where education is truly about unleashing every child's fullest potential and I know that that India is the country I want to live in.



Teach For India is a non-profit organisation that is a part of the Teach For All network, working towards eliminating educational inequity in India. The Fellowship recruits college graduates and working professionals to serve as full-time teachers in low-income schools for two years. <https://apply.teachforindia.org/>

"Our current education system creates all students as replicas of each other, only judging them on their grades. Marks and grades need to go. Stress should be placed on internalizing the subject matter. Society needs an awakened student. To achieve that, institutes need to bring in master teachers." **MANTRA MUGDH, actor**



# The new world of work needs a newer education system



world of work align.

However, there seems to be little/ no movement towards these in the present education system. The same education system that has to prepare the future of this country, the youth, for the future of work, continues to exist in the same way it has for years... not acknowledging this rapidly transforming world.

Having said this, one may also argue that before we begin to incorporate the future of work, we need to ensure the education systems are addressing the gross disconnect that seems to lie between what is taught in school and what is applied by and expected of the workforce when they commence their careers.

Hence, there is an urgent need to incorporate necessary changes in the education system so that they ensure three things:

- 1) The youth is aware of the career options available to them, and the path to take to achieve them, including the jobs of the future.
- 2) The youth is able to make an informed decision about the career options most suited to them, aligning with their skills and interests.
- 3) Educational institutions are equipped with the means to prepare the youth for their preferred career choices.

While the current education system provides a solid foundation to students, it needs to integrate and incorporate these aforementioned salient points to equip and enlighten the youth further, so that they can make better decisions and in turn help build the economy of the country.

The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs 2018 report states that while automation will lead to reduction in the workforce in var-

ious companies, the share of many emerging professions will increase their share of employment from 16% to 27% by 2022. Hence, while there are challenges in terms of work being automated and jobs being lost, there are also opportunities in terms of jobs that are being added or being transformed from their current traditional ways. Lifelong learning is one such way to ensure that these opportunities are utilized. Continuous learning will also ensure that any threat to changes in the way of work are countered. A 2016 report on the 'Future of Jobs in India by BCG and CII' elaborates upon this.

At present, there is a lack of knowledge of professions beyond a few popular ones. Almost 67% of the students we spoke to in 2018, through our programs at Arthan Foundation, had knowledge about only a few limited career domains — medicine, law, teaching, engineering and some vocational careers like salon services, stitching, and electrical or plumbing services. Further, even within these there was paucity of understanding of what must be done to make a career in these professions — the qualifications needed, or steps to approach them and so on. More critically, there was no emphasis on exploring career options that matched the passion and interests of the students. Students were mostly unaware about the jobs of the future — AI, Data Analytics, Robotics, Machine Learning and so on.

The future world of work for which the present must prepare has many unanswered questions. And while we would have to approach each question carefully, what is needed now is to ensure that skills (cognitive, technical or so-

cial-emotional) that are taught in school are aligned with what will be required in the job market of the future. Career counselling — that enables exposure to the vast array of career paths along with the manner to approach these careers — ought to be made available to students, where technology can play a crucial role to bridge the gap and provide accessibility to students in the most remote parts of the country.

Arthan Foundation is a Delhi-based non-profit organisation that prepares students for the future of work through its career planning and 21st century skills program. Arthan Foundation believes that empowering children with the right knowledge, information and 21st century skills to enable them to make informed career choices is critical to alleviating poverty in India.



**Anchal Kakkar**  
VP, Strategy & Partnerships



**Mahamaya Navlakha**  
Co-Founder, Arthan

Lifelong learning. Learning to learn. Un-learning. All these phrases were unheard of till a few years ago, but now play a very crucial role.

What do these phrases signify?

Simply put, with rapid, dynamic advancements in artificial intelligence and technology changing the landscape of the world of work, the way we work and the work we do are rapidly changing. And these changes beget changes in the education system to stay up-to-date and ensure the world of learning and the



"Education is the passport to a good future. Something that stays with the child forever. To uplift our country, a good quality education would teach from history not to make the same mistakes. It teaches us tolerance, respecting each other's differences and remaining united. The boys learn to respect girls and when the girls grow up to be mothers, they pass on that knowledge to their families, their

children. Education alleviates the mind to higher thoughts and clarity. It is the most essential and most powerful weapon of a country."

**ROSHNI DAMANIA**,  
Honorary Vice President,  
Byramjee Jeejeebhoy  
Home under The Society  
for the Protection of  
Children in  
Western India

"Education is a basic human right that one must avail of. The path of even a humble education means human development." **AMRITA ARORA**, actress & homemaker



## What ails Indian ed system



**Kreeanne Rabadi**  
Regional Director, CRY - Child Rights and You (West)

Education is the most powerful weapon to change the world," Nelson Mandela said.

As a young nation, the Kothari Commission recommended a complete overhaul of the education system, as it recognised education as the single most fundamental instrument to achieve social, economic and cultural transformation essential to realise national goals.

Based on this very premise, India formulated its first comprehensive education policy. While in the intervening years some progressive steps have indeed been taken in the policy space, education for every last child still remains an unfulfilled goal, as inadequate funding and lacklustre implementation continue to plague the dreams of millions of our children.

So, what put brakes to our journey to fulfil the goal of universalising education? Of course, the intent of the government was not flawed. The historic Right to (Free and Compulsory) Education Act 2009 (RTE) was a testament to this, and its huge impact on India's education indicators is indisputable. However, as we completed a decade of implementation of this landmark Act last year, the pace and reach of implementation highlighted the emerging need for a rejig, which the recent draft of New Education Policy ventured to address.

Universalisation of elemen-

tary education with 'Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan' (now merged into 'Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan'), RTE's flagship programme, has impacted enrolment rates positively, but has failed to reach every last child and does not reflect on the rates of retention. While the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) indicating the general level of participation per stage of school education surpasses 95% at the primary level, it decreases to less than 80% at the secondary level and plummets to 55% at higher secondary. Similarly, Age Specific Enrolment (enrolment of specific age groups in school, regardless of which class they go to) in the age groups of 6-10 and 11-13 years stands at a formidable 90%, drops to a mediocre 76.5% in the age group of 14-15 years, and further to a shoddy 45.9% in the age group of 16-17.

Looking at the dropout figures, average annual rates are at 6.3% and 5.7% in the primary and upper-primary levels respectively, but shoots up to a high 19.5% at the secondary level. A class-wise analysis of dropout numbers suggests that the phenomenon is restricted within 4% up to the seventh standard (12/13 years) before going up to a 9% - 31% in the eighth, ninth and tenth standards (14/16 years). Also, with less than 4% of schools in the country to offer complete school education from Class 1 to Class 12, and less than 20% of schools offering secondary and higher secondary education, dropout of children as they go up the education ladder is more a systemic flaw. These datasets are proof enough for the criticality of the extension required for RTE Act up to 18 years of age, and this has been the agenda we at CRY - Child Rights and You have been continually advocating for.

Having said that, establish-

ing a continuum of education for all children, as envisaged by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), looks equally important. Pre-schooling (from 3-6 years) is a critical step, which, when missing, impacts the entire continuum.

The New Education Policy 2019 stresses on restructuring of the school curriculum, combining three years of pre-primary and the first two years of primary schooling into the first foundational phase. A large quantum of work and adequate financial and human resource investment will need to be done here as majority of states currently have not made provisions for pre-school education through anganwadis or downward extension of the school system.

The government rightly recognised teachers' training to be critical to a qualitative change in education, mandating that all teachers need to acquire the minimum qualifications prescribed by the academic authority within 2019. But that has yet not been achieved. According to estimates, currently more than 2 million teachers in the country have an educational qualification below graduation and one in every five teachers is not professionally qualified.

This brings us back to the fundamental question of inadequate funding. The coming decade will see the biggest cohort of India's children slowly move into adulthood. Allocating adequate resources to strengthen their present and build their future would certainly be the game changer. Designed well and monitored properly, it promises enough potential to drive the country to become a world leader, thriving on a high demographic dividend.

Child Rights and You is an Indian NGO that believes in every child's right to a childhood.



## Bringing out the extraordinary human potential in every child



**Prodipta Hore**  
Program Director,  
Aditya Birla Education Academy

The education system in India is riddled with a myriad of issues. Many find that the children do not have any conceptual understanding, no creativity, they are stressed and the list goes on. These are just the symptoms. But what is the root cause of all these? What is the fundamental problem with the education system? Every child is unique before they start going to school. They think differently but the education system makes every child think the same. This is the fundamental flaw in the education system.

During the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century, the education system was designed to make children ready to work in factories. The factories did not want the children to think but to work mechanically like robots. So the education system stripped the children of their freedom to think and destroyed their true potential. The same education

system that was prevalent in the US and Europe was adopted worldwide. Although this system evolved in the Western countries over a period of time, the same old system continues to be followed in Asia and subsequently in India even today. After independence, the thrust was to create more blue collar jobs. India was once an agrarian economy. It was only in the '90s when liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation started, that India started producing more jobs in the services sector. Only the industries have changed but the education system didn't. Despite India emerging as one of the fastest growing economies in the world (as per BRICs research), the rote system of learning in India prevailed. Parents seem more worried about the number of hours taught in a classroom rather than the quality of teaching hours. For them, keeping the child occupied in the classroom matters more than what learnings the child has imbibed.

Through the years in school, children lose the power of thinking on their own, whether it is the choice of career, relationship or life situation. They become dependent on others for answers, they completely lose their true nature and their extraordinary potential remains unrealised.

Now we are facing innumerable questions in the world for which we are only awaiting answers. So what is the solution? We need an education system that recognises every

child is different and questioning-based approach, so that it brings out the extraordinary human potential in every child. Dream of a child is nationwide movement, which call upon every educator, every policymaker, everyone who has a role to play in the development of a child, to join hands together to reform the education system and bring out the latent potential in every child.

Teaching as a career has to be made more attractive in terms of pay, perks, etc. At the same time, the entry criteria have to be made more robust and fool proof. We have witnessed how competitive exams are able to funnel best of the talent. Students cracking these ex-

ams invariably go on to have great careers in life. The same thing should apply for teaching profession as well. This will certainly raise standards of school teachers.

Despite limitations in the infrastructure, teacher-student relationship can flourish provided a right approach for learning is adopted. We know of the Gurukul system of learning. Prof. Anand Kumar's Super 30 is popular nationwide. But we need this on a larger scale to cater to the mammoth student population of India. Today at our disposal, we have technology as a great facilitator for learning. A wealth of knowledge and information is at our fingertips. Students should be enabled to sift through an ocean of information and pick up the knowledge that is relevant to them.

For the development of a child, there is a constant fight between the nature versus nurture. If the child is not born to inherently intelligent or genius parents, the lacuna can be certainly bridged by proper nurture by good teachers, who are responsible for shaping up the child's personality from an early age. It is quite possible that all the teachers can end up being rote models in their own subject of expertise be it Mathematics, Sports, Music, Drama, etc. This can only happen when teachers are chosen who are extremely passionate about their subjects.



"When the citizens of a country are educated, the country progresses. Illiteracy, population

explosion, noise and air pollution, and all the other issues we are facing today is because the bulk of our population is uneducated. When the people of a country are educated, they will vote sensibly; they will select leaders who will then lead the country into becoming a superpower. Quality education improves the quality of life!"

**DR ADITI GOVITRIKAR**,  
**DR ADITI GOVITRIKAR**,  
actress & mental health professional

## Start now!



**Samyukta Subramanian**  
Program Head - Early Years,  
Pratham Educational Foundation

India has been grappling with gender-based violence of enormous magnitude. Rapes, domestic violence, female foeticide, and malnutrition are issues that are unfortunately all too familiar for India. Individuals and organisations have been trying to stem these issues by working with the 11 to 14 age group, some with 14 to 18 years and above. But if the current ASER data is anything to go by, it is a startling indicator suggesting that the roots of inequalities and

stereotypes about boys and girls are deeply ingrained in our society and begin to be evident quite early. Decisions about whether to invest in a boy or a girl are taken in the first five years of a child's life, and children's own stereotypes about what they can do or not do begin even earlier.

**Sex-wise enrollment in schools in the early years**  
In ASER 2018, data was collected across 596 of 619 districts of India. At age 4, 60.3% girls were in government pre-schools/ schools as compared to 55.7% boys. The percentage point difference here was 4.6. By age 8, this difference had risen to 8.4, with 68% girls in government facilities as compared to 59.6% boys (see adjoining ASER 2018 table).

When data was collected across India in ASER 2019, this trend was again visible nationally, with 56.8% girls in the age group of 4-5 enrolled in government pre-schools/ schools as compared to 50.4% boys. At age 6-8, a similar trend was visible, but the gap widened with 61% girls in government institutions as compared to 52% boys. The reverse was seen in private schools where 39% girls are enrolled at age 6-8 as compared to almost 48% boys.

**What do these trajectories imply?**  
Government schools are free of cost while private schools cost money. Private pre-schools and schools are perceived as providing better quality

education. Though studies have pointed out that the quality of private schools is highly inconsistent and often leaves much to be desired, the reality is that they are much coveted. When there is a paucity of resources and parents have to choose which child to invest in, they probably choose to provide 'better quality' education to the son first as compared to the daughter.

This trend becomes more daunting in the face of the fact that India has a skewed child sex ratio. As per Census 2011, the child sex ratio (0-6 years) in India has been declining dangerously over the years with respect to girls (919 females per 1000 males). There are fewer girls in India as compared to boys and of the girls in rural India, a higher percentage of girls are enrolled in government pre-schools/ schools as compared to boys.

**No Response**  
During the ASER assessment when children are given a task, they answer correctly, incorrectly or give no response, and this is recorded as such. No response means that the child did not answer the question.

In ASER 2019, for age 4 to 8, there were a maximum of 24 tasks that 4- and 5-year-old children were expected to attempt. 6- to 8-year-old children had to carry out 21 tasks. An analysis of the responses by children shows that for almost every task, the proportion of girls giving no response

was higher than that of boys. While the difference between boys' and girls' responses seen in ASER 2019 is small for young children between ages 4 to 8, it becomes much wider by age 14 to 18. This trend of higher 'no response' by girls across age groups cannot be a mere coincidence.

Volunteers said that on many occasions they could not really tell the difference between girls and boys. At a very young age, it is often difficult to distinguish between the sexes based on external physical characteristics like length of hair or clothes. Yet, this data on 'no response' indicates that while on the outside there is no apparent difference, something invisible in terms of socialisation is certainly already changing the perception of boys versus that of girls.

These two data points from ASER - one on enrollment patterns and the other on children's response to the assessment tasks - seem to highlight separate, but obviously related ways in which boys and girls experience education differently. One indicates preferential treatment towards boys and the other points to a lack of self-confidence among girls.

While the silver lining is that parents across India have begun sending both their boys and girls to school, parents perceive private schools as providing better education as compared to government schools. The higher enrollment of girls in

government schools suggests that parents are probably guided by the widely held societal belief and cultural norm that boys should have the first right to perceived better resources.

These trends should strike a warning bell. Over the last 14 years, ASER has succeeded in collecting nationwide rural data across the lifespan of children and youth (4 to 18 years) in India. Analysed from the lens of gender equity, so many years of data has the potential for much deeper research and investigation. It already throws up many questions for each of us: How do we bring about a change in existing belief systems so that girls are treated equitably in our country? How are government schools preparing for the fact that more girls than ever before are in their system today? To build the bridge towards gender equity, we must recognise the widespread gender discrimination that is embedded within and around us. Any effort to bring about a lasting change in mindsets and behaviour requires observation of pre-schools, schools and home environments; plus close engagement with young children, their parents and their schools as early as possible.

Samyukta Subramanian is Program Head - Early Years, Pratham Educational Foundation