

GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES FOR UNIVERSAL AND EQUITABLE PRIMARY EDUCATION IN INDIA

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Abstract

Universal access to elementary education is both a constitutional commitment and a central requirement for social and economic development in India. This paper presents a documentary and analytical review of major government interventions intended to widen participation in school education and reduce barriers faced by disadvantaged learners. It examines the evolution from early elementary-education initiatives to rights-based and integrated approaches, with particular attention to Operation Blackboard, the District Primary Education Programme, the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, NPEGEL, Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya, RMSA, ICT @ School, the Right to Education Act, inclusive education initiatives, minority-institution support and Eklavya Model Residential Schools. The analysis shows that educational access has gradually been understood in a broader sense: a child must not only have a school nearby but should also be able to enrol, attend regularly, remain in school, learn effectively and progress to higher stages. The paper further considers the relevance of the National Education Policy 2020, which places universal access, equity, foundational learning, inclusion, teacher development and quality at the centre of school reform. Official policy documents emphasize that India has made major progress in elementary enrolment while continuing to face challenges related to retention, quality, regional disparities and the participation of socio-economically disadvantaged groups (Ministry of Education, 2020a, 2020b). The paper concludes that the next phase of universalization requires stronger implementation, outcome-based monitoring, teacher support, inclusive infrastructure, community participation and sustained attention to learners who remain educationally vulnerable.

Keywords: *Primary Education; Elementary Education; Universal Access; Educational Equity; Government Schemes; RTE Act; Samagra Shiksha; Inclusive Education; Foundational Literacy; NEP 2020.*

1. Introduction

Education occupies a strategic place in India's development because it influences individual capabilities, social mobility, citizenship and participation in economic life. Elementary education has a particularly important role because it provides the foundation for literacy, numeracy, communication, social development and later learning. The challenge of making schooling accessible is complex in a country characterized by substantial differences in geography, income, gender, social background and availability of educational resources.

The constitutional development of the right to elementary education provides the foundation for government action. The 86th Constitutional Amendment introduced Article 21-A, and the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 operationalized the right of children in the 6–14 age group to free and compulsory elementary education. The Ministry of Education maintains an official RTE framework and documentation for the Act (Ministry of Education, 2009).

The policy agenda has subsequently moved beyond the simple expansion of enrolment. NEP 2020

identifies universal access, participation, retention, foundational literacy and numeracy, equity and quality as interconnected priorities. It notes that Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, now subsumed within Samagra Shiksha, contributed to near-universal elementary enrolment, while retention and transition at later stages continue to require attention (Ministry of Education, 2020a).

Against this background, the present study revisits the major schemes contained in the supplied source paper and reframes their contribution in original academic language. The discussion distinguishes between broad universal interventions and targeted measures designed to support children who face additional educational barriers.

2. Objectives of the Study

- To examine the major schemes launched by the Government of India for expanding access to elementary and related levels of education.
- To understand how the schemes address educational inequalities based on gender, caste, tribe, minority status, disability and economic disadvantage.

3. Methodology

The study uses a descriptive, analytical and documentary method. The uploaded source paper was used as the principal historical and scheme-wise source, while official Ministry of Education documents were consulted to strengthen the policy context and update the discussion. The study does not claim original field data, experimental evidence or a statistical evaluation of individual schemes. Instead, it interprets the stated objectives and educational significance of the interventions.

For academic integrity, the discussion has been independently rewritten rather than reproducing sentences from the supplied paper. Citations have been added where policy claims are drawn from official documents. The references include government documents and selected scholarly works listed in or associated with the source material. The analysis therefore combines source-derived description with an interpretive synthesis.

4. Evolution of Universal Elementary Education in India

India's approach to elementary education has developed from a broad constitutional aspiration toward a rights-based and increasingly outcome-oriented framework. The early commitment under Article 45 was followed by successive education policies and programmes that attempted to increase school availability and participation. The inclusion of education in the Concurrent List in 1976 strengthened the shared responsibilities of the Union and States.

The 86th Constitutional Amendment was a major turning point because it gave elementary education a fundamental-right dimension through Article 21-A. The RTE Act translated this constitutional principle into statutory provisions concerning free and compulsory education, admission, attendance, completion, teacher-related norms and school standards (Ministry of Education, 2009).

More recently, NEP 2020 has emphasized universal access from early childhood through secondary education, with special attention to children from socio-economically disadvantaged groups. The policy recognizes that school access must be accompanied by adequate infrastructure, trained teachers, tracking of participation and mechanisms for children who have dropped out to re-enter education (Ministry of Education, 2020a).

5. Major Government Schemes

5.1 Operation Blackboard

Operation Blackboard represented an important attempt to establish minimum physical and human-resource conditions in primary schools. The source paper associates the programme with classroom facilities, essential amenities and teacher provision. Its underlying educational logic is significant:

children cannot benefit from universal enrolment if schools lack basic conditions necessary for teaching and learning.

The intervention also reflected an equity concern because poor school facilities can disproportionately affect children in underserved communities. Infrastructure improvement therefore functions as both a quality measure and an access measure.

5.2 District Primary Education Programme (DPEP)

DPEP, introduced in 1994, adopted a district-level strategy for improving primary education. The programme was concerned with universal access, retention, learning achievement and reduction of disparities. Its importance lies in recognizing that educational planning must respond to local conditions rather than assuming that identical interventions will produce identical results everywhere.

The programme also illustrates the movement from an enrolment-centred model to a more comprehensive approach. Increasing the number of children entering school is meaningful only when attendance, continuation and learning are sustained.

5.3 Mid-Day Meal Scheme / PM POSHAN

The school-meal intervention connected educational participation with children's nutritional welfare. The original scheme discussed in the source paper was designed to improve nutrition and encourage enrolment, attendance and retention. The present national framework is known as PM POSHAN, and the Ministry of Education identifies it as a major school-education intervention addressing nutritional needs (Department of School Education & Literacy, 2026).

The educational rationale is straightforward: children who experience hunger or nutritional deprivation may find it more difficult to attend school regularly or participate fully in learning. School meals can also reduce some household costs and make schooling more attractive to families facing economic constraints. Nutrition support should therefore be viewed as part of an enabling ecosystem for education rather than as a separate welfare measure.

5.4 Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and Samagra Shiksha

Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan became a major national framework for universal elementary education from 2000–2001. The source paper describes its emphasis on access, retention, quality, gender equality, social equity and learning achievement. Over time, school education planning has moved toward an integrated framework through Samagra Shiksha.

The Ministry of Education currently describes Samagra Shiksha as a scheme covering school

education from pre-school through Class XII. This integrated perspective is important because educational development should not treat primary, upper-primary and secondary stages as isolated compartments (Department of School Education & Literacy, 2026).

5.5 NPEGEL and KGBV

NPEGEL was designed to address the educational participation of girls, particularly in educationally backward areas. The programme recognized that simply creating schools does not automatically eliminate gender barriers. Girls may face household responsibilities, safety concerns, distance-related difficulties and social expectations that influence attendance and continuation.

Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya provided residential schooling opportunities for girls from disadvantaged communities in educationally backward areas. Its significance lies in combining gender-focused intervention with social equity. Residential facilities can reduce the effect of distance and provide a structured educational environment for girls who might otherwise experience difficulty continuing school.

5.6 RMSA and Model Schools

RMSA extended the policy concern from elementary access to secondary participation and quality. The programme sought to reduce social, gender and regional disparities and to strengthen secondary education. Its relevance to elementary education is indirect but important: universal primary schooling has limited long-term value if children face barriers when transitioning to secondary education.

The Model School initiative was intended to create high-quality examples of rural schooling and strengthen infrastructure, curriculum, assessment and administration. Such interventions reflect concern about the unequal distribution of educational opportunities between rural and better-served locations.

5.7 Vocationalisation and ICT @ School

Vocationalisation of secondary education attempted to diversify educational pathways and improve employability. This is relevant to universal access because students have different aspirations and abilities, and an education system that provides varied pathways can reduce the perception that formal academic schooling is the only valuable route.

ICT @ School promoted computer-based learning and ICT infrastructure. The contemporary policy environment has expanded this agenda through digital platforms and teacher-support initiatives. Ministry of Education material identifies DIKSHA as a national digital platform and highlights its role in providing educational resources and accessible content (Ministry of Education, 2023). Technology

can widen access to learning materials, but digital infrastructure must be accompanied by connectivity, teacher capacity and appropriate pedagogy.

5.8 Right to Education Act, 2009

The RTE Act is central to the rights-based approach to elementary education. It established a statutory framework for free and compulsory education for children in the 6–14 age group and specified responsibilities related to admission, attendance and completion. The Act also deals with school norms, teacher requirements and conditions intended to support child-friendly education (Ministry of Education, 2009).

The significance of the Act is conceptual as well as legal. Educational access becomes an entitlement rather than merely a programme benefit. This strengthens the accountability of public authorities and reinforces the principle that financial or institutional barriers should not prevent a child from completing elementary education.

5.9 Inclusive Education

Inclusive education broadens the meaning of universal access by requiring schools to respond to children with disabilities and other learners who need additional support. The source paper discusses IEDSS as an intervention for inclusive education at the secondary stage. Current policy has further emphasized accessible teaching-learning materials and Universal Design for Learning approaches for children with special needs (Ministry of Education, 2023).

Inclusion requires more than admission. It involves accessible infrastructure, appropriate materials, teacher preparation, supportive attitudes and participation in classroom and school life. A genuinely universal system must therefore evaluate whether children with disabilities can learn and participate on equitable terms.

5.10 Minority Institutions and Eklavya Model Residential Schools

The source paper includes Infrastructure Development in Minority Institutions as an intervention intended to improve basic educational facilities. Such support recognizes that institutional infrastructure can influence educational quality and participation in minority communities.

Eklavya Model Residential Schools represent a targeted educational response for Scheduled Tribe communities. Residential models can be particularly relevant in geographically dispersed or remote areas where conventional school access may be difficult. These interventions illustrate how universalization may require additional institutional arrangements for communities facing distinctive geographical or socio-economic barriers.

6. Educational Inequality: Gender, Social Group, Disability and Poverty

Educational inequality is multidimensional. Gender, caste, tribal identity, minority status, disability and poverty can overlap and reinforce one another. Consequently, a universal school system requires both common entitlements and targeted support. Programmes such as NPEGEL and KGBV address gender-related barriers; EMRS addresses the needs of tribal learners; inclusive-education interventions focus on disability; and nutrition and free-education measures can reduce economic barriers.

NEP 2020 explicitly uses the concept of Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) and calls for measures that promote full inclusion and equity. It also stresses that school culture should be changed so that teachers, school leaders and students understand inclusion, dignity, diversity and equity (Ministry of Education, 2020b). This represents an important shift from viewing disadvantaged children as recipients of isolated schemes toward viewing inclusion as a responsibility of the whole school system.

The policy also recognizes that remote areas may need special attention. It calls for adequate infrastructure, trained teachers and, where necessary, transport or hostel facilities so that children can access quality schooling (Ministry of Education, 2020a). Thus, educational equality requires attention to both physical distance and social conditions.

7. From Access to Learning: The Quality Dimension

A major lesson from the development of educational schemes is that access and quality cannot be separated. A school may be geographically accessible but educationally ineffective if it lacks teachers, learning materials or appropriate pedagogical practices. Similarly, high enrolment can coexist with weak retention and learning outcomes.

NEP 2020 places strong emphasis on foundational literacy and numeracy. It recommends strengthening early learning, teacher development, formative assessment and access to high-quality learning resources. The policy also emphasizes pupil-teacher ratios and continuous professional development, particularly for foundational learning (Ministry of Education, 2020a).

This quality orientation is particularly relevant to disadvantaged children because weak learning outcomes can compound social inequality. If children from poorer or marginalized communities receive less effective schooling, educational expansion may increase participation without fully reducing inequality. The goal should therefore be equitable access to effective learning.

8. Discussion

The schemes examined in this paper can be grouped into five broad functions: expanding physical access, reducing economic barriers, improving participation and retention, strengthening educational quality, and addressing specific forms of disadvantage. This classification shows why no single programme can achieve universalization on its own.

Infrastructure interventions create the physical conditions for schooling, while nutrition and free-education measures reduce barriers to participation. Gender- and community-specific programmes address barriers that universal schemes may not fully reach. Teacher and learning interventions address quality. The RTE Act provides the rights-based foundation within which these interventions operate.

The contemporary policy framework also indicates that the focus is moving toward integrated school education and measurable learning outcomes. NEP 2020 states that India has achieved substantial progress toward near-universal elementary enrolment but identifies retention and transition as continuing concerns (Ministry of Education, 2020a). This suggests that the next stage of reform should concentrate on keeping children in education and ensuring that they actually learn.

The analysis also indicates that implementation quality is as important as policy design. A scheme may have an appropriate objective but limited impact if resources do not reach schools effectively, teachers are unavailable, infrastructure is not maintained or disadvantaged families are not adequately engaged. Monitoring should therefore examine outcomes at school and community levels rather than simply recording whether a programme exists.

9. Major Challenges

- Persistent educational disadvantage among some social and economically vulnerable groups.
- Dropout and weak transition at later stages despite substantial progress in elementary enrolment.
- Unequal infrastructure and teacher availability across regions and schools.
- Difficulty in ensuring effective inclusion of children with disabilities.
- Gender-related barriers affecting attendance, retention and continuation.
- Digital inequality and differences in access to devices, connectivity and digital learning support.
- Need for stronger alignment between school access, foundational learning and later educational progression.

- Variations in implementation capacity, monitoring and community participation.

10. Suggestions

- Strengthen outcome-based monitoring of enrolment, attendance, retention, completion and learning achievement.
- Give priority to schools serving socio-economically disadvantaged and geographically remote communities.
- Improve equitable deployment, professional development and mentoring of teachers.
- Strengthen gender-responsive facilities, transport, hostels and community support wherever required.
- Ensure accessible infrastructure and teaching-learning materials for children with disabilities.
- Maintain nutrition support and integrate school health and welfare measures with educational planning.
- Expand foundational literacy and numeracy support in the early grades.
- Use digital platforms as complementary resources while addressing the digital divide.
- Promote active participation of parents, local communities and school management structures.
- Evaluate government schemes through measurable educational and equity outcomes, not enrolment alone.

11. Conclusion

India's journey toward universal and equitable primary education has involved a sequence of constitutional, policy and programme-level interventions. The schemes reviewed in this paper demonstrate an increasingly comprehensive understanding of access: children need a nearby and affordable school, but they also need nutrition, safe infrastructure, qualified teachers, inclusive learning environments, continuity and meaningful learning opportunities.

The evidence reviewed from official policy documents indicates that considerable progress has been made in elementary enrolment, while challenges remain in retention, quality and equitable participation. NEP 2020 seeks to build on earlier programmes by combining universal access with foundational learning, inclusion, teacher development, digital resources and stronger attention to socio-economically disadvantaged groups (Ministry of Education, 2020a, 2020b).

The central conclusion is that universalization should be understood as a continuing process rather than a completed numerical target. The success of educational policy ultimately depends on whether children from every social and economic background are able to enter school, participate

regularly, learn effectively and progress through the education system. Future educational planning should therefore combine universal entitlements with targeted equity measures, reliable implementation and continuous evidence-based monitoring.

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