

Government Schools in India – Challenges, Relevance, and the Road Ahead

Introduction

Education is the foundation of a nation's social and economic progress. In India, government schools have historically been the backbone of the education system, providing access to millions of children, particularly from poor and marginalised communities. Yet, the latest National Statistics Office (NSO) Comprehensive Modular Survey on Education reveals a worrying decline in attendance and enrolment in government schools. This trend underlines deep-rooted problems in the system and has significant implications for India's future workforce and equity.

Status and Nature of Government Schools in India

India has one of the world's largest schooling systems –

1. Over 10 lakh government and government-aided schools operate across rural and urban India.
2. They cater to children from low-income and marginalised families, providing education either free or at a very nominal cost.
3. Many government schools are linked with welfare measures like the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, free uniforms, and textbooks.
4. The system employs lakhs of teachers, who are relatively better paid compared to many private school counterparts.

Despite this vast reach, recent surveys highlight a steady exodus of students from government schools to private institutions, even though private education is much costlier and not always superior in learning outcomes.

Significance of Government Schools

1. **Equity and Social Justice** – Provide access to education for children from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, and economically weaker families. Act as instruments for reducing social inequality.
2. **Nation-Building** – State schooling has been the backbone of rapid development in countries like South Korea, China, and Singapore. A strong public school system can create a skilled workforce and strengthen democratic values.
3. **Affordability** – Government schools charge nominal fees, often just a fraction of private school expenses. In rural India, private schooling costs are on average seven times higher than government schooling.
4. **Inclusive Growth** – By educating the poorest, government schools expand opportunities and prevent intergenerational poverty.

Problems of Government Schools in India

1. **Declining Enrolment and Attendance** – The NSO survey shows a 10 percentage-point drop in rural higher secondary enrolment (68% in 2017-18 to 58.9% in 2025). Families, even poor ones, increasingly prefer private schools due to perception of better quality.
2. **Teacher Absenteeism and Vacancies** – Teacher absenteeism is as high as 25% nationally, and in some states as high as 46%. Large number of vacancies add to learning deficits.
3. **Infrastructure Deficits** – Many schools lack toilets, drinking water, libraries, laboratories, and digital facilities. Safety and hygiene issues deter enrolment, especially of girls.
4. **Quality of Learning** – Surveys like ASER (Annual Status of Education Report) show that even after five years of schooling, many children cannot read simple texts or do basic arithmetic. The quality gap between private and government schools (real or perceived) drives families towards fee-paying institutions.
5. **Lack of Accountability** – While teachers are well-paid, performance monitoring is weak. School management committees often lack authority to enforce accountability.
6. **Social Segregation** – With middle-class families exiting, government schools are increasingly left with the poorest, reinforcing inequality and limiting aspirations.

Government Measures

Right to Education Act (2009) – Mandated free and compulsory education for children aged 6–14 years. Set norms for infrastructure, teacher–student ratios, and quality benchmarks.

Mid-Day Meal Scheme (now PM POSHAN) – Provides free meals to improve attendance, nutrition, and retention.

Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan – Integrated scheme covering pre-school to senior secondary education, focused on quality and equity.

Digital India Initiatives – Smart classrooms, DIKSHA platform, and digital libraries to modernise government schooling.

Recruitment and Training – States like Delhi have invested in teacher training, infrastructure, and “happiness curriculum,” showing promising outcomes.

Government Schools in the New Education Policy (NEP 2020)

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 places government schools at the heart of reform –

1. **Universal Access** – Ensure every child is enrolled and attends school.
2. **Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)** – Pre-schooling integrated into government schools.
3. **Foundational Literacy and Numeracy** – Mission to achieve universal literacy by Grade 3.
4. **Teacher Training and Accountability** – National mission to improve teacher quality, merit-based recruitment, and performance-linked promotions.
5. **Public Investment** – NEP recommends raising public education spending to 6% of GDP.
6. **School Complexes** – Pooling of resources among small government schools for better efficiency.

Suggestions

1. **Improve Accountability** – Introduce biometric attendance for teachers. Empower School Management Committees with real monitoring powers.
2. **Upgrade Infrastructure** – Ensure basic amenities like toilets, libraries, and digital facilities in all schools.
3. **Teacher Reforms** – Regular training, performance-linked incentives, and faster filling of vacancies.
4. **Strengthen Learning Outcomes** – Focus on foundational literacy and numeracy as NEP 2020 emphasises. Continuous student assessment instead of rote-based exams.
5. **Restore Public Trust** – Showcase model schools (like Delhi government schools) as proof that government schools can outperform private ones.
6. **Bridge Social Inequality** – Encourage middle-class families to return to government schools by improving quality and reducing the stigma attached to them.

Conclusion

Government schools are not just education centres but engines of social justice, equity, and nation-building. Their decline reflects systemic issues that, if left unaddressed, could deepen inequality and trap millions in cycles of poverty. Reviving them requires accountability, investment, and reform, as envisaged in NEP 2020. India's demographic dividend will only pay off if every child, rich or poor, receives quality schooling. Strengthening government schools, therefore, is not a choice but a necessity for India's future.

Main practice Question.

1. "Government schools in India face declining enrolment and eroding quality despite being central to equity and nation-building. Critically analyze their challenges, significance, reforms under NEP 2020, and suggest measures for revival."

Answering Guidelines

1. Introduction (40–50 words) – Mention the role of government schools in India's education system. Cite recent NSO survey showing sharp decline in enrolment, especially in rural higher-secondary levels. Highlight paradox – affordable yet losing trust of families.

2. Body

1. Significance of Government Schools (80–100 words)

1. Provide affordable education to poor and marginalised.

2. Promote social equity and inclusion.
3. Historically vital for literacy expansion.
4. Example – Asian Tigers and China relied on strong public schooling systems.

2. Key Challenges (100–120 words)

1. Declining enrolment due to perceived low quality.
2. Teacher absenteeism and vacancies (up to 25–46%).
3. Poor infrastructure (toilets, digital tools, libraries).
4. Learning outcomes weak (ASER findings).
5. Social segregation – richer families move to private schools, leaving poor behind.
6. Accountability gap despite high salaries post Pay Commissions.

3. Government Measures (60–80 words)

1. RTE Act (2009) – free and compulsory education.
2. Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan – integrated scheme for school education.
3. Mid-Day Meal / PM POSHAN – nutrition and retention.
4. Digital initiatives – DIKSHA, smart classrooms.

4. NEP 2020 Provisions (60–80 words)

1. Universal access & ECCE integration.
2. Foundational literacy and numeracy mission.
3. Teacher training, merit-based recruitment.
4. School complexes for resource efficiency.
5. Target – public spending at 6% of GDP.

5. Suggestions (80–100 words)

1. Strengthen accountability (biometric attendance, empowered SMCs).
2. Upgrade infrastructure and digital tools.
3. Fill teacher vacancies quickly, link pay to performance.
4. Showcase model government schools (Delhi example).
5. Encourage middle-class participation to reduce stigma.
6. Improve continuous learning assessments instead of rote exams.

3. Conclusion (40–50 words) – Government schools remain vital for equity, democracy, and demographic dividend. Reviving them requires investment, accountability, and reform as envisioned in NEP 2020. A strong public school system is not optional but essential for India's inclusive growth and nation-building.