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MAINS Impact- 2025 – 04/02/2025

ASER 2024 AND SCHOOL EDUCATION SYSTEM IN INDIA

SYLLABUS:

GS 2> Social justice > Education

REFERENCE NEWS:

- Recently released, the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2024, conducted by Pratham, highlights a sharp **recovery in reading and arithmetic skills among children aged 6-14. Government schools have led the improvement**, marking the highest basic reading levels for Class 3 students since the survey began 20 years ago.
- Conducted by ASER Centre, the survey assessed 6.5 lakh children across 605 districts.
- Utilized the 2011 Census framework for selecting 30 villages per district and 20 households per village. Children between the ages of 5 to 16 years were tested on basic reading and arithmetic.

ABOUT ANNUAL STATUS OF EDUCATION REPORT (ASER):

- This is an annual survey that aims to **provide reliable estimates of children's enrolment and basic learning levels for each district and state in India.**
- ASER tools and procedures are designed by ASER Centre, the research and assessment arm of **Pratham.**
- Pratham is an **NGO working towards the provision of quality education** to the underprivileged children in India.
- ASER has been conducted **every year since 2005 in all rural districts of India.**
- It is the largest citizen-led survey in India. It is also the only annual source of information on children's learning outcomes available in India today.
- Unlike most other large-scale learning assessments, ASER is a **household-based rather than school-based survey.**
- The assessment methodology has remained unchanged since 2007, allowing for consistent comparisons over time.

KEY FINDINGS OF ASER 2024 REPORT

Sharp Improvement in Reading Skills

- **Government Schools:** The percentage of Class 3 students who can read a Class 2-level textbook has reached **23.4%**—the highest recorded in the last **20 years**. This is a sharp rise from **16.3% in 2022** and **20.9% in 2018**.
- **Overall (Government + Private Schools):** Reading levels have improved from **20.5% in 2022** to **27.1% in 2024**, nearly reaching the **pre-pandemic level of 27.3% in 2018**.
- **Regional Recovery:** Almost all states (except **Jammu & Kashmir and Nagaland**) have shown improved reading skills in Class 3 students compared to 2022.

Recovery in Arithmetic Skills

- The percentage of Class 3 students who can **perform at least subtraction** has risen to **33.7% in 2024**, recovering from **25.9% in 2022** and surpassing **28.2% in 2018**.
- This reflects a significant post-pandemic recovery, with arithmetic skills now **stronger than pre-pandemic levels**.

State-Wise Gains in Learning Outcomes

- **Biggest gains in reading levels (2022–2024):**
 - **Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Maharashtra, Odisha, and Uttar Pradesh** recorded an increase of at least **10 percentage points** in Class 3 reading levels.
- **Major improvements compared to 2018:**
 - **Bihar:**
 - Reading levels improved from **12.1% in 2018 to 20.1% in 2024**.
 - Arithmetic skills improved from **18% in 2018 to 28.2% in 2024**.
 - **Uttarakhand:**
 - Reading levels increased from **24.7% in 2018 to 35.6% in 2024**.
 - **Uttar Pradesh (Biggest Gains):**
 - Govt school reading levels improved from **12.3% in 2018 to 27.9% in 2024**.
 - Overall reading levels (Govt + Private) increased from **28.3% in 2018 to 34.4% in 2024**.
 - Arithmetic skills rose from **26.9% in 2018 to 40.7% in 2024**.

Learning Levels of Older Students

- **Class 5 Reading Levels:**
 - Increased from **42.8% in 2022 to 48.7% in 2024**.
 - However, it remains **below 50.4% in 2018**, indicating some gap in full recovery.
- **Class 5 Arithmetic Skills:**
 - Improved from **25.6% in 2022 to 30.7% in 2024**.
 - This is higher than the **pre-pandemic level of 27.8% in 2018**, showing stronger recovery.

Government School Enrollment Trends

- **Enrollment in Government Schools (6-14 years):**
 - **2018:** 65.6%.
 - **2022:** 72.9% (increase due to pandemic-driven shift from private to government schools).
 - **2024:** 66.8% (returning closer to pre-pandemic levels).
- **Overall School Enrollment (6-14 years):**
 - Stood at **98.1% in 2024**, similar to **98.4% in 2022**, indicating **strong retention in school education**.

Growth in Early Childhood Education

- There has been an increase in **pre-primary enrollment**, driven by **NEP 2020's focus on early childhood education**.
- The highest increase was among **5-year-olds**, where enrollment rose from **58.5% in 2018 to 71.4% in 2024**.

Digital Literacy Insights (First-Time Assessment)

- **Smartphone Usage (14-16 years):**
 - **Boys:** 85.5% report knowing how to use a smartphone.
 - **Girls:** 79.4% report the same.
- **Educational Use of Smartphones:**
 - Only **57% of teens** use smartphones for **learning purposes**, indicating a **gap between access and productive use** of digital technology in education.

Role of Nipun Bharat Mission in Learning Gains

- The sharpest learning improvements were observed in **primary school students**.
- These gains align with the objectives of the **Nipun Bharat Mission**, which focuses on **Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN)**.
- The success of this initiative reflects **strong state and national policy interventions** aimed at bridging learning gaps caused by the **pandemic's disruption**.

CONCERNS ASSOCIATED WITH SCHOOL EDUCATION IN INDIA

- **Quality of Education: One-Dimensional and Exam-Oriented**
 - Education in India remains **marks-centric**, with an **obsessive focus on examinations** rather than actual **learning outcomes**.
 - The **ASER report** consistently highlights that a **large proportion of students in early grades** struggle with **basic reading and arithmetic skills**.
 - Schools emphasize **rote memorization** instead of **conceptual understanding, creativity, and problem-solving skills**.
- **Low Public Spending on Education:**
 - India's public expenditure on education has ranged between **4.1% and 4.6% of GDP** from **2015 to 2024**, which is **below the 6% benchmark recommended by the Education Commission (1966) and the Education 2030 Framework for Action**.
 - As per **UNESCO data**, India's public expenditure on education per student **lags behind other Asian countries**, including **China**. This results in **inadequate infrastructure, shortage of teachers, outdated curricula, and limited access to learning resources**.
- **Inadequate Teacher-Student Ratio and Teacher Training**
 - While developed countries maintain a **ratio of 11.4**, in India, it stands at **22.0**, leading to **overcrowded classrooms** and **less personalized attention**.
 - For instance, according to data from the Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+), there were **1,10,971 single-teacher schools in India during**

the 2023-24 academic year, accounting for approximately 7.15% of the total number of schools.

- **Lack of Training Institutes:**
 - Many teachers lack training in modern pedagogical techniques, relying on traditional rote-based methods.
 - Teachers are often deployed for non-educational purposes, further affecting the quality of instruction.
- **Insufficient Learning Resources**
 - Many students, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged areas, lack textbooks, workbooks, and supplementary learning resources.
 - Due to lack of study materials and home learning support, students struggle to reinforce foundational concepts, impacting their long-term academic growth.
- **Digital Divide: Unequal Access to Technology**
 - Despite advancements, many students in rural areas lack internet access and digital devices, limiting their participation in online learning.
 - For instance, 37% of rural children did not study at all during the pandemic. Only 8% of students had regular access to online education. (Source: School Children's Online and Offline Learning (SCHOOL) Survey Data).
 - The curriculum does not include digital skills, leaving students unprepared for a tech-driven workforce.
- **Socioeconomic Disparities in Education**
 - Lack of school infrastructure, poor home learning environments, and limited parental involvement hinder academic growth.
 - Schools in low-income areas lack basic facilities such as electricity, safe drinking water, and toilets, affecting attendance and retention rates.
- **Issue of Language in Education**
 - With 22 official languages and over 1,500 mother tongues, teaching in a single medium remains a challenge.
 - For instance, many students, especially in tribal and rural areas, struggle to understand lessons as they are taught in a language different from their mother tongue.
 - For example, 43% of Adivasi children were not studying at all, indicating a severe language-based learning gap (Source: SCHOOL Survey).
- **Outdated Curriculum & Lack of Skill-Based Education:**
 - Traditional syllabus does not include digital literacy, financial education, or coding skills.
 - Vocational training is minimal, leaving students unprepared for employment and entrepreneurship.
 - While the NEP 2020 aims for curriculum modernization, implementation remains slow and inconsistent across states.
- **Flawed Assessment and Examination System**
 - Exams test rote learning instead of conceptual clarity, discouraging creative and analytical thinking.

- Students are **not trained in problem-solving, logical reasoning, or decision-making skills**, affecting their **long-term professional and academic growth**.
- **Lack of Inclusive Education for Students with Disabilities**
 - Many schools **lack ramps, braille books, and special educators**, making it **difficult for students with disabilities to access quality education**.
 - Despite the **Right to Education (RTE) Act**, many schools **lack resources to implement inclusive policies effectively**.
- **Poor Infrastructure in Schools**
 - **Many government schools lack drinking water, toilets, and libraries**, creating an **unfavorable learning environment**.
 - **Lack of classroom space and electricity** affects student **concentration and engagement**.
- **Policy Implementation Gaps**
 - While **RTE ensures free and compulsory education**, its implementation remains **inconsistent** due to:
 - **Funding shortages.**
 - **Teacher shortages.**
- **Literacy Levels and Parental Involvement**
 - According to the **2011 Census**, India's literacy rate is **74.04%**, meaning **nearly a quarter of parents are still illiterate**.
 - **Illiterate parents find it difficult to monitor their child's education**, resulting in:
 - **Irregular attendance.**
 - **Low learning levels.**
 - **Higher dropout rates.**

GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES:

- **Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA):** Launched to achieve universal elementary education, SSA aims to provide free and compulsory education to children aged 6-14, as mandated by the 86th Amendment to the Constitution.
- **Samagra Shiksha:** Introduced in 2018-19, this overarching program integrates SSA, Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA), and Teacher Education (TE), covering education from pre-nursery to Class 12. It focuses on improving school effectiveness through equal opportunities and equitable learning outcomes.
- **Mid-Day Meal Scheme:** Initiated in 2001, this scheme provides prepared meals to children in government and government-aided primary schools, ensuring a minimum of 300 calories and 8-12 grams of protein per day for at least 200 days annually.
- **National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT):** As the apex body for school education, NCERT offers support and technical assistance to schools across India, overseeing the implementation of education policies.
- **Schemes for Infrastructure Development of Private Aided/Unaided Minority Institutes (IDMI):** Operationalized to enhance infrastructure in private aided/unaided minority schools, IDMI aims to improve the quality of education for minority children.
- **Strengthening for Providing Quality Education in Madrasas (SPQEM):** This scheme seeks to improve the quality of education in madrasas, enabling Muslim children to attain standards comparable to the national education system in formal subjects.

- **Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009:** Following the 86th Amendment, the RTE Act mandates free and compulsory primary education for children aged 6 to 14. It includes provisions such as 25% reservation for disadvantaged sections, age-appropriate class placement for non-admitted children, and norms for pupil-teacher ratios and infrastructure.
- **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020:** This policy introduces a comprehensive framework for education reform, emphasizing foundational literacy and numeracy, curricular flexibility, and multidisciplinary learning. It proposes a 5+3+3+4 curricular structure and aims to achieve universal foundational literacy and numeracy in primary school by 2025.
- **NIPUN Bharat Mission:** Launched in July 2021 under the NEP 2020 framework, the National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy (NIPUN Bharat) aims to ensure that every child in India attains foundational literacy and numeracy by the end of Grade 3 by 2026-27.
- **PM SHRI Scheme:** Announced in September 2022, the Pradhan Mantri Schools for Rising India (PM SHRI) scheme aims to develop more than 14,500 schools as model institutions, showcasing the implementation of NEP 2020. These schools will feature modern infrastructure, innovative pedagogy, and technology integration.

WAY FORWARD:

To sustain the **learning recovery highlighted in ASER 2024**, comprehensive reforms are needed in **funding, teacher training, curriculum modernization, and digital integration.**

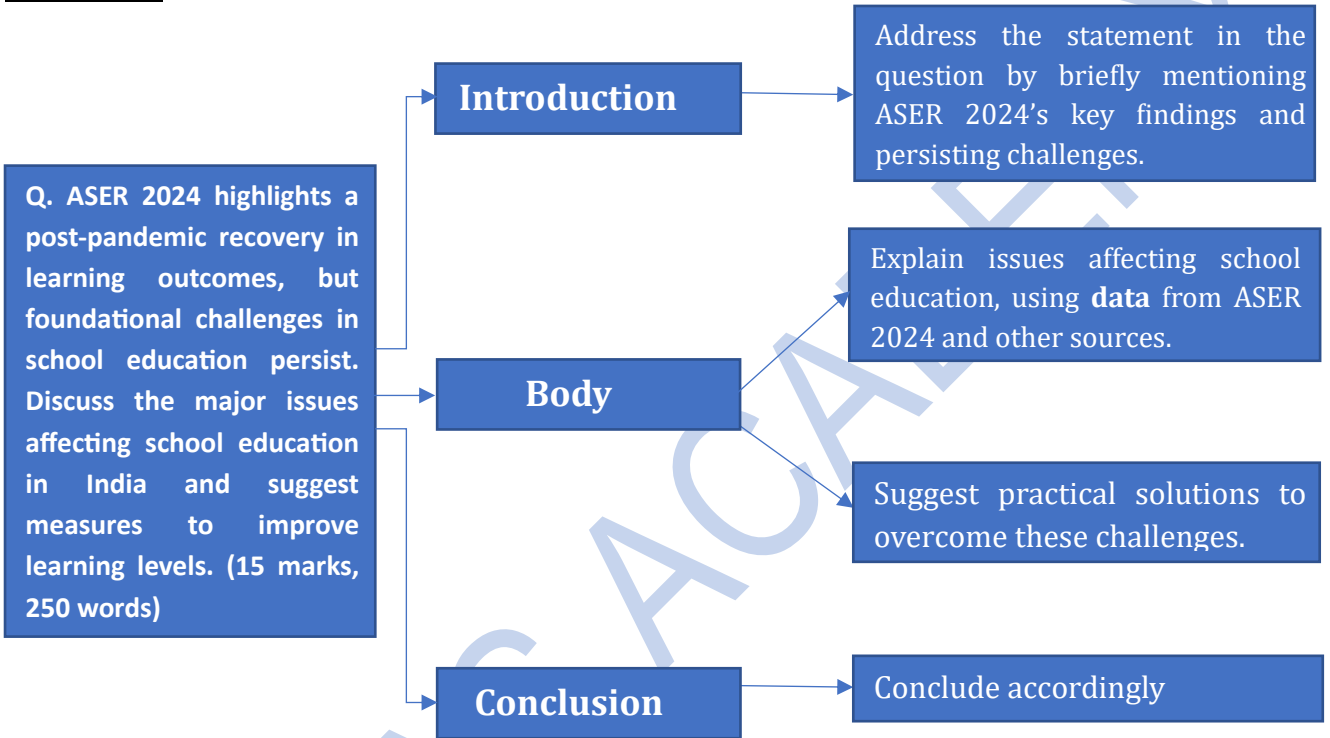
- **Enhancing Foundational Learning & Inclusive Education:**
 - Ensure **effective implementation** of **NIPUN Bharat** for foundational literacy and numeracy.
 - Introduce **remedial learning programs** for lagging students.
 - Improve **accessibility for disabled students** with better infrastructure and specialized educators.
- **Increasing Public Spending & Infrastructure Development:**
 - **Raise education spending to 6% of GDP** to improve **school facilities, digital access, and sanitation.**
 - **Decentralized funding** to help states **address local education needs** effectively.
- **Improving Teacher Training & Student-Teacher Ratio:**
 - Recruit **more qualified teachers** to reduce the **high student-teacher ratio (22:1).**
 - Implement **modern pedagogical training programs** for teachers.
 - Prevent **deployment of teachers for non-educational duties.**
- **Bridging the Digital Divide & Modernizing Curriculum:**
 - Expand **internet access and e-learning tools** for rural students.
 - Integrate **coding, AI, and vocational training** into school curricula.
 - Accelerate **NEP 2020 implementation** to replace **rote learning with skill-based education.**
- **Reforming Assessments & Strengthening Governance:**
 - Shift from **memorization-based exams** to **competency-based evaluations.**
 - Strengthen **School Management Committees (SMCs)** for better accountability.
 - Use **real-time data (UDISE+)** for policy decisions and monitoring progress.

CONCLUSION: Targeted reforms in **funding, teacher training, curriculum, digital access, and governance** are essential for **sustaining learning gains** and ensuring **quality, inclusive, and future-ready education** in India.

PRACTICE QUESTION:

Q. ASER 2024 highlights a post-pandemic recovery in learning outcomes, but foundational challenges in school education persist. Discuss the major issues affecting school education in India and suggest measures to improve learning levels. (15 marks, 250 words)

APPROACH:



MODEL ANSWER:

The **Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2024 highlights a significant recovery in reading and arithmetic skills among children post-pandemic.** The report shows **sharp improvements in foundational learning**, particularly in **government schools**, where Class 3 reading levels have reached **23.4% in 2024, the highest recorded in 20 years.** However, despite these gains, **major structural issues persist**, including **poor learning outcomes, inadequate infrastructure, low public spending, and disparities in access to quality education.** Addressing these challenges is essential for ensuring **sustainable improvements** in India's school education system.

Challenges in School Education in India:

1. Learning Outcomes and Quality of Education

- **ASER 2024 findings:**
 - **Class 3 Reading Levels:** Improved to **23.4% in 2024**, up from **16.3% in 2022** and **20.9% in 2018.**
 - **Arithmetic Skills:** **33.7% of Class 3 students** can now perform basic subtraction, up from **25.9% in 2022** and **28.2% in 2018.**

- **Government School Gains:** The **reading ability of Class 3 students** in government schools has seen the **highest improvement since ASER began**.
- Despite this progress, **many students still lack foundational literacy and numeracy skills**, impacting their ability to transition to higher education.
- The education system remains **exam-centric**, relying on **rote memorization rather than conceptual understanding**.

2. Low Public Expenditure on Education

- **India's education spending (4.1%–4.6% of GDP)** remains **below the recommended 6% (Education Commission 1966 & UNESCO)**.
- **Limited investment in infrastructure, teacher salaries, and digital learning tools** restricts access to quality education.

3. Inadequate Teacher-Student Ratio and Training

- India's **student-teacher ratio (22:1)** is significantly **higher than developed nations (11:1)**, leading to **overcrowded classrooms**.
- **UDISE+ 2023-24 data: 7.15% of schools in India operate with a single teacher**, affecting student engagement.
- Many teachers **lack training in modern pedagogical methods**, affecting classroom effectiveness.

4. Digital Divide and Unequal Access to Technology

- **ASER 2024 Digital Literacy Findings:**
 - **Smartphone Usage (14-16 years): 85.5% of boys and 79.4% of girls** report knowing how to use a smartphone.
 - **Education Use: Only 57% of teens use smartphones for learning**, highlighting a **gap between access and productive usage**.
- **SCHOOL Survey Data:**
 - **37% of rural children had no access to education** during the pandemic.
 - **Only 8% studied online**, indicating **limited digital infrastructure in rural areas**.

5. Socioeconomic and Regional Disparities

- **Low-income schools lack basic facilities** like **electricity, toilets, and safe drinking water**, affecting **attendance and retention rates**.
- **Language barriers** in tribal and rural areas hinder comprehension, with **43% of Adivasi children reportedly not studying at all (SCHOOL Survey)**.

6. Outdated Curriculum and Flawed Assessment System

- **NEP 2020 aims to modernize the curriculum**, but implementation remains **slow and inconsistent**.
- The **current syllabus lacks digital literacy, financial education, and vocational skills**, making students **unprepared for employment**.
- Exams emphasize **rote memorization over critical thinking**, limiting students' analytical abilities.

Measures to Improve Learning Outcomes:

1. Strengthening Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN)

- Expand NIPUN Bharat Mission to ensure all students achieve FLN by Grade 3.
- Implement remedial learning programs to support lagging students.

2. Increasing Public Investment in Education

- Raise education spending to 6% of GDP to improve school infrastructure, teacher salaries, and learning resources.
- Decentralized funding to allow state-specific interventions based on educational needs.

3. Enhancing Teacher Training and Recruitment

- Reduce the student-teacher ratio by hiring more qualified teachers.
- Strengthen teacher training programs to promote modern teaching techniques and interactive learning.
- Prevent deployment of teachers for non-educational duties to ensure better classroom engagement.

4. Bridging the Digital Divide

- Expand access to digital tools in rural areas through low-cost tablets and internet connectivity.
- Introduce technology-integrated learning methods for enhanced student engagement.

5. Curriculum Modernization and Skill-Based Education

- Accelerate NEP 2020 implementation to integrate coding, AI, and vocational training into school curricula.
- Shift from rote-based exams to competency-based assessments focusing on critical thinking.

6. Strengthening Inclusive Education and Governance

- Improve infrastructure for students with disabilities, including ramps, Braille books, and special educators.
- Strengthen School Management Committees (SMCs) to improve accountability in education governance.

While ASER 2024 indicates post-pandemic improvements in learning outcomes, foundational challenges remain significant. Addressing issues like low public investment, teacher shortages, digital inequality, and outdated curricula is essential for ensuring a quality, inclusive, and future-ready education system. Comprehensive reforms in funding, policy implementation, and digital integration are key to sustaining long-term improvements in India's school education system.