Education

School education in Rajasthan: policy reforms, statistical insights, and equity challenges

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Received 14 Aug 2025; Accepted 19 Sep 2025; Published 6 Oct 2025

DOI: https://doi.org/10.64171/JAES.5.4.11-21

Abstract

This study examines the trajectory of school education in Rajasthan from 1950 to 2024, focusing on policy reforms, statistical trends, and persistent equity challenges. Drawing upon Census data, Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+) statistics, and secondary literature, the analysis is organized in two phases: Phase I (1950–2017), which traces long-term expansion and reforms, and Phase II (2018–2024), which provides a detailed account of recent consolidation and digitalization. Findings show that Rajasthan has made significant progress in expanding access, improving literacy, and reducing gender gaps, particularly through state-specific innovations such as the Shiksha Karmi Project, Lok Jumbish, and Adarsh Yojana, alongside national interventions like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, the Right to Education Act, and Samagra Shiksha. Despite these achievements, persistent inequities remain across gender, social groups, and rural–urban divides. SC and ST girls in rural areas continue to rely disproportionately on government schools, which face challenges of weak infrastructure and low learning outcomes, while OBC and General urban families increasingly opt for private schooling. Comparative analysis of primary, upper primary, secondary, and higher secondary levels reveal that although higher secondary education has witnessed the greatest progress, secondary schooling remains the weakest link, with high dropout rates and declining government infrastructure. The study concludes that sustained investments in quality, retention, and equity are critical to ensuring inclusive educational development in Rajasthan.

Keywords: School education, Enrolment, Equity, Gender gap, Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Government schools, Private schools, Education policy, Digitalization, Quality of education, Samagra Shiksha, National Education Policy 2020

Introduction

Rajasthan is widely recognized as one of the economically backward states in India, roots are in geographic limitations, resource scarcity, and historical underinvestment in infrastructure. The state's predominantly arid and semi-arid terrain restricts agricultural productivity, while challenges of irrigation and low soil fertility further constrain rural livelihoods (Government of Rajasthan, 2022). Limited industrial growth, coupled with persistent deficiencies in infrastructure such as roads, electricity, and clean water, has slowed overall economic development (World Bank, 2018) [27]. These structural weaknesses are closely linked to persistent social challenges, including poor health outcomes, gender disparities, and low literacy rates, particularly among women and marginalized communities (Census of India, 2011; Govinda & Biswal, 2006) [4, 9]. Conservative social norms and economic deprivation reinforce cycles of inequality, restricting access to education and employment opportunities for disadvantaged groups (Jha & Parvati, 2010) [11]. In this context, qualitative education is only the most effective and sustainable tool to address Rajasthan's interlinked economic and social barriers. Education, particularly when emphasizing vocational training, skill-based learning, and inclusive approaches for Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and girls, serves as a catalyst for empowerment, social mobility, and community participation (Tilak, 2007; UNESCO, 2015) [24, 25]. The persistent economic and social backwardness in Rajasthan can be addressed by ensuring equitable access to high-quality basic education for all, thereby laying a strong foundation for inclusive human development and sustainable long-term prosperity.

In the immediate post-independence period, Rajasthan inherited fragmented and underdeveloped school education system, which left the state at a disadvantage compared to the rest of India. In 1951, the literacy rate in Rajasthan was only 8.5 percent, significantly lower than the national average of 18.3 percent. Female literacy was especially poor at 2.7 percent, compared with 8.9 percent at the national level (Census of India, 1951) [4]. This legacy of uneven educational development meant that women, rural populations, and marginalized social groups entered the modern era of education from a position of severe disadvantage (Chopra, 1992) [5].

In the immediate post-independence period, Rajasthan inherited a fragmented and underdeveloped education system, which placed the state at a significant disadvantage compared to the rest of India and contributed to its overall backwardness. In 1951, the literacy rate in Rajasthan was only 8.5 percent, significantly lower than the national average of 18.3 percent. Female literacy was especially poor at 2.7 percent, compared with 8.9 percent at the national level (Census of India, 1951) [4]. This legacy of uneven educational development meant that women, rural populations, and marginalized social groups entered the modern era of education from a position of severe disadvantage (Chopra, 1992) [5].

Since independence, both national and state-level policies have been systematically formulated and implemented with the objective of strengthening school education in Rajasthan. At the national level, the Education Commission (1964–66), also known as the Kothari Commission, laid the foundation for modern educational planning, emphasizing universal elementary education and equity (Government of India, 1966) [7]. The National Policy on Education (1968) and its revised version (1986, updated in 1992) provided long-term frameworks to expand access, improve teacher training, and introduce innovations such as Operation Blackboard (1987), which targeted infrastructure in primary schools. Subsequent national schemes, including the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP, 1994) and the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA, 2001), sought to universalize elementary education, enhance enrolment, and reduce gender and social disparities (Govinda & Biswal, 2006) [9]. The Right to Education Act (2009) made free and compulsory education a constitutional right for children aged 6–14, while the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA, 2009) expanded the focus to universalize secondary education (Mehrotra, 2012) [18]. More recently, the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (2018) integrated elementary, secondary, and teacher education under a single framework, aligning with the National Education Policy (NEP, 2020), which emphasizes equity, digital learning, and holistic development (Ministry of Education, 2020) [19].

Alongside these national initiatives, Rajasthan pioneered several innovative state-level reforms to address its unique challenges of low literacy, large rural populations, and socio-cultural barriers. The Shiksha Karmi Project (1987) was introduced to reduce teacher absenteeism and improve access in remote tribal regions through the recruitment of local para-teachers (Govinda, 2002) [8]. The Lok Jumbish Pariyojana (1992) focused on community mobilization, decentralized management, and participatory school governance, particularly in marginalized areas (Sharma, 1999; Batra, 2005) [23, 3]. The Adarsh Yojana (2014) aimed to create model schools with improved facilities by upgrading existing institutions, while initiatives like the PRAGATI scheme emphasized performance-linked funding. Gender-focused interventions such as Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBVs) expanded access for girls in rural and disadvantaged areas. More recently, Digital Rajasthan and the World Bank–supported STARS project (2021) prioritized ICT integration and monitoring, while residential and scholarship schemes targeted SC/ST and minority students. Collectively, these interventions contributed to significant progress: by 2011, Rajasthan's literacy rate had risen to 66.1 percent, narrowing the gap with the national average of 73.0 percent, while enrolment at the primary level approached near-universal levels (Census of India, 2011; Ministry of Education, 2024) [4].

As results of successive government policies and interventions, Rajasthan has witnessed substantial improvements in enrolment and literacy rates since independence. However, the socially desirable goals of achieving equity and quality in education have remained elusive. Even after around eight decades of independence, the state's school education system continues to be marked by persistent inequalities, deeply rooted in gender, regional location, and social group identity (Census of India, 2011; Govinda & Biswal, 2006; Jha & Parvati, 2010; ASER Centre, 2019; Ministry of Education, 2023) [4, 9, 11, 1, 21]. Female literacy has consistently lagged behind that of males, with the gap particularly wide among Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Census of India, 2011) [4].

Rural–urban disparities continue to exacerbate educational inequalities in Rajasthan, as rural schools frequently face challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, and weaker learning outcomes compared to their urban counterparts (Govinda & Biswal, 2006) [9]. Private schools in Rajasthan generally perform better than government schools in terms of student outcomes, including test scores, attendance, and progression rates. Empirical studies highlight that private institutions often possess superior infrastructure—such as reliable electricity, sanitation, and digital facilities—and typically maintain more favourable student–teacher ratios (ASER Centre, 2019; Kingdon, 2017) [1, 13]. However, these advantages come at a higher financial cost, limiting access for children from economically weaker sections and thereby reinforcing patterns of educational stratification (Jha & Parvati, 2010; Mehrotra, 2012) [11, 18]. Social hierarchies also play a decisive role: children from marginalized groups, particularly Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), remain disproportionately dependent on government schools, while those from Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and General categories are more likely to be enrolled in private institutions, particularly in urban areas (Jha & Parvati, 2010) [11]. Taken together, these intersecting disparities underscore that while Rajasthan has achieved notable progress in enrolment and literacy, the broader goals of equity and quality in education remain elusive.

Rajasthan has been chosen as the focus of this study precisely because it illustrates both the achievements and the persistent challenges of school education in India. The state's trajectory reflects substantial progress since independence, with major gains in literacy, enrolment, and institutional expansion, yet these advances remain unevenly distributed across gender, regional, and social categories. Rajasthan continues to be characterized by stark rural–urban divides, deep-rooted caste and tribal disparities, and persistent gender gaps, particularly among marginalized communities. This dual reality makes Rajasthan a compelling case for examining how historical legacies, policy interventions, and socio-economic structures interact to shape educational outcomes. Accordingly, this study analyses the development of school education in Rajasthan between 1950 and 2024, with a particular focus on three interrelated dimensions: (a) the historical legacy and policy reforms shaping educational structures and access, (b) the interpretation of long-term statistical trends across different levels of schooling, and (c) the persistent inequalities that continue to affect outcomes by gender, regional location, and social group identity.

Review of Literature

The study of school education in India has generated an extensive body of literature addressing policy reforms,

institutional frameworks, statistical progress, and persistent inequities. At the national level, education in post-independence India has consistently been positioned as both a human right and a developmental priority (UNESCO, 2015; World Bank, 2018) [25, 27]. The Education Commission (1964–66), popularly known as the Kothari Commission, provided the first comprehensive national vision for education. It emphasized education as a driver of modernization and social justice, recommending the common school system, the 10+2+3 structure, and universal elementary education. The Commission also stressed bridging regional and social disparities, which later informed the National Policy on Education (1968) and subsequent reforms (Government of India, 1966; Tilak, 2007) [7, 24].

Building on this foundation, several landmark initiatives sought to expand educational access. Operation Blackboard (1987) aimed to improve school infrastructure but was constrained by implementation challenges (Tilak, 2007) [24]. The District Primary Education Programme (DPEP, 1994), launched with World Bank support, contributed to enrolment growth though it left unresolved issues of regional and gender disparities (Govinda & Biswal, 2006) [9]. The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA, 2001) was one of the most ambitious interventions, improving infrastructure and teacher recruitment, yet scholars questioned its effectiveness in addressing learning outcomes (Govinda, 2002; Jha & Parvati, 2010) [8, 11]. The Right to Education Act (2009) made free and compulsory education a justiciable right for children aged 6–14, though concerns about financing and institutional capacity persist (Mehrotra, 2012) [18]. Despite these efforts, evidence shows that while India has achieved near-universal enrolment, challenges in retention and learning outcomes remain acute (Kingdon, 2007; ASER Centre, 2019) [12, 1].

Within this national context, Rajasthan presents a distinctive case owing to its fragmented pre-independence legacy and its pioneering post-independence reforms. Modern education in Rajasthan began in the mid-19th century, with progressive princely states such as Jaipur establishing public instruction departments, Sanskrit colleges, and schools for boys and girls as early as 1844 (Chopra, 1992) [5]. Smaller states such as Pratapgarh, however, lagged behind, and early initiatives often reinforced gender stereotypes. At independence, Rajasthan inherited a weak and uneven educational system, reflected in its extremely low literacy levels. In 1951, the state's literacy rate was only 8.5 percent, compared to 18.3 percent at the all-India level, while female literacy stood at just 2.7 percent against the national average of 8.9 percent (Census of India, 1951) [4].

To address these disparities, Rajasthan became a laboratory for innovative interventions. The Shiksha Karmi Project (1987) tackled teacher absenteeism in remote tribal areas by recruiting local para-teachers, increasing participation though its sustainability declined after external funding ended (Govinda, 2002) [8]. The Lok Jumbish Pariyojana (1992) promoted decentralization and community mobilization, improving enrolment in tribal belts, though its long-term impact on pedagogy was limited (Sharma, 1999; Batra, 2005) [23, 3]. These localized reforms complemented national schemes such as SSA, which was later integrated under the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan to ensure continuity from pre-primary to secondary levels (Ministry of Education, 2022) [20]. Literacy-focused programs like the Saakshar Bharat Programme (2009) targeted adult and women's literacy, while Rajasthan-specific initiatives such as the Rajasthan Adarsh Yojana, the PRAGATI scheme, and the Indira Gandhi Scholarship for the Single Girl Child sought to improve gender equity. Early Childhood Care Centres were also expanded to strengthen learning foundations (Jha & Parvati, 2010) [11].

Despite significant progress, inequities persist. Rajasthan recorded the highest literacy growth among Indian states between 1991 and 2001, yet its 2011 literacy rate (67.06%) remained below the national average (74.04%). Gender disparities were stark, with male literacy at 80.51 percent compared to female literacy at 52.66 percent (Census of India, 2011) [4]. Inequities were even more severe in rural areas and among Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), where female literacy lagged significantly. A 2008–09 SSA survey found 1.2 million out-of-school children in Rajasthan, the majority being girls, reflecting socio-cultural barriers such as early marriage and parental resistance (Govinda & Biswal, 2006) [9]. Social stratification further shapes access: SC and ST children remain heavily dependent on government schools, while OBC and General category children increasingly attend private schools, producing a dual system that reinforces inequalities (Jha & Parvati, 2010) [11].

The quality of education remains a pressing concern. Learning levels in government schools are described as "disturbingly low," especially in reading and arithmetic, with Rajasthan consistently below national averages (ASER Centre, 2019) [1]. Teacher absenteeism, inadequate training, and frequent transfers undermine outcomes (Kingdon, 2007) [12]. Infrastructure deficits, such as insufficient classrooms and poor student–teacher ratios, exacerbate challenges. A longitudinal study in rural Rajasthan highlights the "ghettoization" of government schools, where declining social diversity and the concentration of marginalized groups contrast with the growing preference for private schools—even among tribal families—who perceive government schools as low quality (Jha & Parvati, 2010) [11].

At the institutional level, Rajasthan has created directorates for elementary, secondary, and Sanskrit education, supported by District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs). Yet many DIETs remain underutilized and lack adequate resources. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) based initiatives, including digital literacy programs and e-content platforms, have been introduced to modernize learning, though their effectiveness has been uneven (Ministry of Education, 2022) [20]. Scholars argue that while Rajasthan has invested significantly in school education and achieved notable progress, a more comprehensive and integrated approach is still needed to overcome entrenched inequities and ensure inclusive, high-quality education for all (Govinda & Biswal, 2006; Tilak, 2007) [9, 24].

Recent comparative studies reinforce these insights. Meena (2025a) [16] documents how across major Indian states—including Rajasthan—government school enrolments have declined over the past decade due to school mergers, parental demand for English-medium education, and perceptions of private school quality, especially in urban contexts. Yet, government schools remain vital for rural and marginalized communities, underscoring the need for sustained investments in equity and quality. Similarly, Meena (2025b) [17] shows that the shift from public to private schooling is strongly associated with rising incomes, disparities in digital infrastructure, and persistent gaps in foundational learning outcomes. The study cautions that unless government schools are revitalized through quality-focused reforms, privatization will deepen existing inequalities in access and outcomes.

Taken together, the literature underscores both progress and limitations in Rajasthan's educational development. On the one hand, national reforms and state-specific innovations have significantly expanded access and improved enrolment. On the other, deep-rooted inequalities based on gender, rural–urban divides, and social stratification continue to hinder equitable outcomes. Much of the existing research is fragmented, focusing either on specific programs like SSA, Shiksha Karmi, or Lok Jumbish, or on select indicators such as enrolment and literacy. Few studies provide a comprehensive, longitudinal account that integrates historical legacies, policy reforms, statistical trends, and equity dimensions from 1950 to 2024. This study seeks to address that gap by presenting a holistic analysis of Rajasthan's school education trajectory, situating both progress and persistent challenges within the broader framework of India's educational reforms and Rajasthan's socio-cultural context.

Methodology

This study employs a descriptive and analytical research design, relying primarily on secondary data sources to trace the evolution of school education in Rajasthan from 1950 to 2024. The analysis is structured around three interrelated dimensions: (a) the role of government policies at both national and state levels and their influence on the status of school education, (b) statistical trends related to enrolment, schools, teachers, and infrastructure, and (c) the persistence of unequal access to quality school education across gender, social groups, and regional contexts.

Data Sources

This study draws upon secondary data from diverse sources. Long-term literacy trends were analysed using the Census of India (1951–2011) [4], while recent school-level statistics on enrolment, teachers, and infrastructure were obtained from UDISE+ (Ministry of Education). Additional information was incorporated from the Economic Survey of Rajasthan (Government of Rajasthan, 2022), Rajasthan State Education Reports, and key policy documents, including the National Policies on Education (1968, 1986, 1992), the Right to Education Act (2009), and the Samagra Shiksha Framework (2018). Independent surveys such as the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) further enriched the analysis by providing insights into access, equity, and learning outcomes (ASER Centre, 2019) [1].

Scope of Analysis

The study focuses on four levels of schooling—primary, upper primary, secondary, and higher secondary—with emphasis on historical changes, growth patterns, and existence of inequalities. Key variables analysed include:

- Enrolment trends disaggregated by gender, social category (SC, ST, OBC, General), and school management type government (include schools administered by different authorities. These consist of schools managed by the state government—such as those under the Department of Education, the Tribal Welfare Department, and aided private institutions—as well as schools operated by local bodies, including Panchayati Raj Institutions and municipal authorities. Additionally, the central government oversees schools such as Kendriya Vidyalayas (KVs), Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas (JNVs), Railway schools, Sainik Schools, and those run by the Social Welfare Department.) and private (schools comprise institutions outside direct government management. These include private unaided schools, Madrasas recognized by the Waqf Board, and unrecognized madrasas operating independently).
- School infrastructure, with focus on electricity, sanitation, and digital facilities.
- Teacher workforce characteristics, including gender composition and distribution across government and private schools.
- Literacy rates examined by gender, rural–urban location, and social categories, compared with national averages.
- Enrolment indicators such as Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), Net Enrolment Ratio (NER), Adjusted Net Enrolment Ratio (ANER), and Age-Specific Enrolment Ratio (ASER), assessed across all levels of schooling.

Limitations

As a secondary data–based study, the analysis is constrained by the availability and reliability of official statistics, particularly for earlier decades. While UDISE+ provides comprehensive school-level data for recent years, disaggregated historical data are limited. The study also does not include primary fieldwork, which restricts qualitative insights into implementation challenges. Nonetheless, triangulation across multiple data sources and scholarly literature enhances the robustness of findings.

Analysis

The analysis has been divided into two phases to align with the nature and reliability of available data. Phase I (1950–2017) relies primarily on data of Census, state education surveys, program documentation, and UDISE, which provide broad indicators of literacy, enrolment, and institutional expansion

but lack consistent annualized disaggregation. This makes the analysis for this period largely historical and descriptive in nature. In contrast, Phase II (2018–2024) draws only upon the UDISE+, which offers standardized, school-level data across multiple dimensions such as enrolment by gender and social category, teacher characteristics, and infrastructure. This allows for more detailed, quantitative, and comparative analysis. The two-phase division thus reflects both the historical trajectory of Rajasthan's education system—from expansion and access in the early decades to consolidation and quality-focused reforms in recent years—and the availability of reliable, disaggregated datasets for the most recent period.

Development of School Education in Rajasthan (1960–61 to 2020–21)

When India gained independence and entered its planning era, Rajasthan having one of the most underdeveloped educational infrastructures in the country. In 1951, the literacy rate in the state was just 8.5%, compared to the national average of 18.3% (Census of India, 1951) [4]. Male literacy stood at 13.9% against 27.2% nationally, while female literacy was a mere 2.7% compared with 8.9% for India. The state had only 5,253 schools in 1950–51, including 4,336 primary, 732 upper primary, and 185 higher secondary institutions (Government of Rajasthan, 1967). Management was overwhelmingly public, with 5,040 schools (95.9%) under government control and just 213 (4.1%) private. Enrolment was limited to 399,100 students, dominated by boys (330,000) compared with girls (66,100). During the First and Second Five-Year Plans, the number of schools more than tripled to 16,501 by 1960–61, and enrolment expanded to 1.13 million (Government of India, 1965). Yet literacy improved only to 18.1%, far below India's 28.3%, with rural female literacy at just 3.2% (Census of India, 1961) [4]. This period was therefore foundational: expansion was rapid and state-led, but disparities remained severe, and private participation was negligible.

The decade of the 1960s brought steady but modest progress. By 1971, Rajasthan's literacy rate had risen to 22.6%, compared with 34.5% nationally (Census of India, 1971) [4]. Male literacy was 33.9% (India 46.0%), while female literacy was only 10.1% (India 22.0%). Schools increased from 16,501 in 1960–61 to 20,783 in 1970–71 (Government of Rajasthan, 1975). Primary schools rose to 16,379, upper primary to 3,297, and higher secondary to 1,107, with government institutions comprising 97.2% of the total. Enrolment nearly doubled to 2.08 million, yet girls accounted for less than one-fourth of the total (Government of India, 1975). Policy momentum came from the Kothari Commission (1964–66) and the National Policy on Education (1968), which emphasized universal elementary education and introduced the 10+2+3 structure. Despite these reforms, literacy gains remained modest and Rajasthan continued to lag behind India.

The 1970s were marked by accelerated institutional growth but continuing social disparities. By 1981, literacy in Rajasthan had improved to 30.1%, still well below the national average of 43.6% (Census of India, 1981) [4]. Male literacy was 44.8% (India 56.4%), while female literacy reached only 14.0% (India 29.8%). Schools increased to 30,156 in 1980–81, including 22,474 primary, 5,200 upper primary, 1,976 secondary, and 506 higher secondary institutions (Government of Rajasthan, 1983). Private schools made modest inroads, accounting for 3.5% of institutions. Enrolment reached 24.8 lakh, with notable increases in secondary education, though girls continued to represent only about one-fifth of the total. Implementation of the 10+2+3 structure reshaped the school system, strengthening the secondary stage. Overall, the decade strengthened institutional growth but failed to significantly close the literacy or gender gaps.

Between 1981 and 1991, expansion accelerated and private participation began to rise. Literacy in Rajasthan increased to 38.6%, though still behind India's 52.2% (Census of India, 1991) [4]. Male literacy reached 55.0% (India 64.1%), while female literacy rose to 20.4% (India 39.3%). Schools grew from 30,156 to 42,593 (Government of Rajasthan, 1993). While government institutions remained dominant (91.8%), private schools expanded to 8.2% of the total. Enrolment doubled to 5.35 million, with significant gains at the upper primary and secondary levels (Government of India, 1993). National reforms such as the National Policy on Education (1986) and Operation Blackboard targeted infrastructure, teacher training, and equity. The 1980s were therefore a period of accelerated expansion and the first meaningful wave of private schools, though gender and regional disparities persisted.

The 1990s represented a turning point. Rajasthan's literacy rose dramatically from 38.6% in 1991 to 60.4% in 2001, almost converging with the national average of 64.8% (Census of India, 2001) [4]. Male literacy increased to 75.7%, nearly equal to the national figure, while female literacy surged to 43.9%, narrowing the gender gap. Schools expanded to 69,834 by 2000–01, with private institutions rising to 16.3% (Government of Rajasthan, 2002). Enrolment more than doubled to 10.8 million, reflecting progress across all levels of schooling. National initiatives such as the District Primary Education Programme (1994) and the early implementation of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan contributed to this remarkable expansion. The 1990s thus transformed Rajasthan's education landscape, with sharp literacy gains, doubled enrolments, and the institutionalisation of private schools as a structural feature.

The 2000s marked the high point of expansion and enrolment. By 2011, literacy in Rajasthan rose to 66.1%, although the state remained below the national average of 73.0% (Census of India, 2011) [4]. Female literacy improved to 52.1%, though still lagging behind India's 64.6%. Schools expanded dramatically to 1,07,167 in 2010–11, with private institutions rising to 27.2% of the total (Government of Rajasthan, 2012). Enrolment peaked at 15.7 million, with near gender parity achieved at the primary stage. National programmes such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and the Right to Education Act (2009) played decisive roles in this expansion by boosting access, improving infrastructure, and mandating universal elementary education. However, while access improved substantially, concerns regarding retention and quality emerged.

The decade 2011–2021 reversed earlier expansionary trends and marked a period of consolidation. Literacy progress slowed after 2011, and gender disparities persisted at the secondary and higher secondary levels. Schools stagnated at around 1.07 lakh, but government institutions declined from 77,976 to 71,353 due to rationalisation and school mergers, while private schools rose to 36,023, accounting for 33.5% of total institutions (Government of Rajasthan, 2021). Enrolment plateaued at around 17.1 million, signalling the end of the expansionary phase. Policy emphasis shifted toward quality and efficiency under the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan and the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (2018). Rajasthan's rationalisation policies, while intended to improve resource efficiency, also increased reliance on private schools. The 2010s were thus characterised by stagnation, restructuring, and consolidation.

Taken together, the long-term trajectory of Rajasthan's school education reflects both impressive expansion and structural transformation. From 1950 to 2021, the number of institutions rose from 5,253 to over 1.07 lakh, enrolments grew from less than 0.4 million to 17.1 million, and literacy improved from 8.5% to 66.1%. Policy frameworks were decisive at each stage: the Five-Year Plans of the 1950s–70s drove state-led expansion; the reforms of the 1980s–90s, including the National Policy on Education (1986), Operation Blackboard, and the District Primary Education Programme, focused on equity and infrastructure; the 2000s, shaped by the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and the Right to Education Act, delivered mass enrolment and peak expansion; and the 2010s, under the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan and Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan, shifted the emphasis to quality and efficiency. The result has been a transformation from a government-dominated model to a mixed public–private system in which private schools now account for one-third of institutions. Rajasthan's challenge in the coming decades will be less about quantitative expansion and more about improving learning outcomes, ensuring equity, and addressing the widening public–private divide in access and quality.

Analysis of School Education in Rajasthan, 2018–19 to 2023–24

The period between 2018–19 and 2023–24 represents a transformative phase in Rajasthan's school education system, shaped by structural reforms, consolidation policies, and targeted investments in digitalization and equity. Unlike earlier decades, which were largely focused on expanding access, this phase emphasized rationalization, efficiency, and quality enhancement through programs such as the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (Ministry of Education, 2020) [19], the Adarsh Yojana (Government of Rajasthan, 2022), and the National Education Policy (NEP, 2020). The following analysis examines Rajasthan's progress and persistent challenges across four levels of schooling—primary, upper primary, secondary, and higher secondary—using UDISE+ data, state policy documents, and national performance benchmarks.

Primary Education in Rajasthan (2018–19 to 2023–24)

At the primary level, Rajasthan witnessed consolidation of its school network and significant improvements in infrastructure. The total number of government primary schools declined from 33,154 in 2018–19 to 32,598 in 2023–24, with rural schools comprising over 96% of the total in both years (estimated by the author from UDISE Plus database). This reduction was the outcome of the *Vidhyalaya Sathapan Evam Viliyajan Yojana*, which merged under-enrolled schools to optimize resources (Government of Rajasthan, 2022). Private schools also declined slightly, from 5,612 to 5,159, but their urban concentration grew, rising from 37% to 42%. This suggests an increasing preference among middle-class families for private schooling in urban centres, while government schools remain dominant in rural provision (Kingdon, 2017) [13].

Enrolment at the primary stage declined from 75.5 lakh in 2018–19 to 73.1 lakh in 2023–24 (–3.2%). Government schools continued to dominate rural education, enrolling 36.3 lakh children in 2023–24 compared to 31.8 lakh in private schools. Girls made up a slightly larger share of enrolment in government schools, particularly among Scheduled Castes (SC) and Infrastructure in government schools improved substantially. Access to electricity rose from 9,733 schools (29%) in 2018–19 to 25,660 (79%) in 2023–24, and internet-enabled schools increased from 286 (1%) to 17,432 (54%). These improvements reflect targeted investment under the Digital Rajasthan initiative and the World Bank–supported STARS Project (2021). However, sanitation gaps persisted: in 2023–24, 3,415 government schools (10%) lacked boys' toilets and 3,478 (11%) lacked girls' toilets. Private schools fared better in electricity access (84%) but lagged in playgrounds and libraries compared to government schools.

Educational outcomes highlight both achievements and challenges. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) declined from 104.8% in 2018–19 to 95.1% in 2023–24, reflecting demographic transition. The Net Enrolment Ratio (NER) was 79.9% in 2023–24, below the national average of 83% (Ministry of Education, 2023). Gender parity improved, with the Gender Parity Index (GPI) rising from 1.00 to 1.03, indicating girls slightly outnumber boys in enrolment.

Parental choices at this stage reflect economic conditions and perceptions of quality. SC/ST families in rural areas depend heavily on government schools due to free provision of meals, uniforms, and scholarships, whereas urban OBC and General families favour private schools for their perceived better quality, English-medium instruction, and stronger peer environments (Govinda & Biswal, 2006) [9].

Policies such as the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan emphasized foundational literacy and numeracy, while schemes like Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas targeted rural SC/ST girls. Despite these efforts, children most disadvantaged remain rural SC/ST girls, who face intersecting challenges of poverty, weak infrastructure, and poor learning levels (ASER Centre, 2019) [1].

Upper Primary Education in Rajasthan (2018–19 to 2023–24)

At the upper primary stage, Rajasthan continued its consolidation process. Government schools declined from 19,491 in 2018–19 to 18,150 in 2023–24, with rural schools forming 94% of the total. Private schools fell slightly from 16,972 to 16,365, but over 61% of these were urban-based by 2023–24, compared to only 6% of government schools (estimated by the author from UDISE Plus database). This duality reflects the dominance of government schools in rural areas and private schools in urban contexts (Govinda & Josephine, 2020).

Enrolment at this stage remained stable at 41.5 lakh in 2023–24, with government schools enrolling 23 lakh (55%) and private schools 18.5 lakh (45%). Girls' enrolment rose significantly in government schools, from 10 lakh in 2018–19 to 12.1 lakh in 2023–24 (+17%). Among SC and ST girls, 2.64 lakh and 2.47 lakh were enrolled in rural government schools, representing nearly 80% of their total enrolment. Boys' enrolment grew modestly in government schools, from 9.44 lakh to 10.9 lakh, while private rural schools witnessed declines, especially among OBC and General boys. Urban private schools, however, attracted a majority of OBC and General children, with 2.43 lakh OBC boys and 1.70 lakh OBC girls in 2023–24 compared to fewer than 45,000 in government urban schools. These enrolment choices underscore that government schools serve disadvantaged SC/ST groups, while private schools are preferred by OBC and General families in cities (Jha & Parvati, 2010) [11].

Teachers in government upper primary schools numbered 1.08 lakh in 2023–24, with female representation increasing from 36% in 2018–19 to 42%. Recruitment drives encouraged female participation (Government of Rajasthan, 2021). In contrast, private schools saw contraction due to financial strain, with declines in rural institutions. Although female teachers grew to 65% of the workforce, overall teacher numbers decreased, consistent with trends in low-fee private schools nationally (Azam & Kingdon, 2019) [2].

Facilities improved substantially in government schools. Internet access increased from 840 schools (4.3%) in 2018–19 to 10,778 (59%) in 2023–24. Electricity coverage was near-universal at 96%. Yet sanitation gaps remained: 1,568 government schools (9%) lacked boys' toilets and 752 (4%) lacked girls' toilets in 2023–24. While private schools expanded internet facilities, they showed stagnation in playgrounds and libraries.

Outcomes at this level show improvement. GER rose from 87% in 2018–19 to 90.9% in 2023–24, surpassing the national average of 89.7%. GPI improved from 0.93 to 1.0, showing equal enrolment of boys and girls. Among disadvantaged groups, SC GER was 99.1% and ST GER 97.7% in 2023–24, narrowing long-standing gaps. However, NER was 66.1%, slightly below the national average of 66%, reflecting retention challenges (Ministry of Education, 2023).

Parental preferences reveal the divides. Rural SC/ST families depend on government schools due to scholarships, free textbooks, and meals, while OBC and General urban families prefer private schools for English-medium education and better peer networks (Govinda & Biswal, 2006) [9]. Distance to schools, following consolidation, posed difficulties for rural SC/ST girls due to safety concerns and social restrictions.

Government policies such as Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan promoted gender-sensitive facilities, ICT, and remedial programs. Scholarships for SC/ST girls and expansion of Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBVs) further improved access. Despite these, ASER reports continue to show weak learning outcomes in reading and arithmetic (ASER Centre, 2019) [1].

In sum, while upper primary education improved in equity and digital facilities, rural SC/ST girls remain the most disadvantaged, facing poor quality education and retention barriers.

Secondary Education in Rajasthan (2018–19 to 2023–24)

Secondary education underwent dramatic restructuring during this period. The number of government secondary schools fell from 3,699 in 2018–19 to just 371 in 2023–24 (–90%), as many were upgraded into higher secondary institutions under the Adarsh Yojana (Government of Rajasthan, 2022). Private secondary schools remained stable at around 7,000, with over 40% located in urban areas, reflecting a shift toward privatization and urban-centred provision.

Total enrolment at the secondary stage declined from 14.1 lakh in 2018–19 to 12.9 lakh in 2023–24 (–8.5%). Government schools accounted for 7.18 lakh students in 2018–19 but only 6.42 lakh in 2023–24 (49.6%), while private schools enrolled 6.52 lakh (50.4%). Girls' participation improved, with their share rising from 47% to 49%. SC and ST girls were concentrated in government rural schools: 1.47 lakh SC and 1.27 lakh ST girls studied in government schools in 2023–24, accounting for 80% of their enrolment. Meanwhile, OBC and General children dominated private schools. Among boys, 56% of OBC boys (1.99 lakh) and 88% of General boys (1.16 lakh) studied in private schools, indicating parental preference for perceived higher quality (Jha & Parvati, 2010) [11].

Teacher distribution reflected feminization in government schools. Male teachers declined from 26,208 in 2018–19 to 1,955 in 2023–24, while female teachers rose from 11,686 to 46,112, comprising 95% of the workforce. Private schools retained a more balanced distribution, though male teachers declined slightly (Azam & Kingdon, 2019) [2].

Government schools experienced infrastructure decline. Electricity access dropped from 3,528 schools (95%) in 2018–19 to just 358 (less than 10%) in 2023–24, and internet access fell from 1,997 to 174. Libraries and computer facilities also contracted. In contrast, private schools-maintained stability, with electricity in over 80% and internet in nearly 6,000 schools.

Outcomes stagnated. Rajasthan's GER remained unchanged at 77%, below the national average of 89.7%. GPI improved from 0.89 to 0.97, narrowing gender gaps. However, GER for SC students fell from 89.1% to 84.3% and for ST students from 88.3% to 79.8%. NER was only 37.4%, below the national 38%. Age-Specific Enrolment Rate (ASER) showed only 60% attendance among adolescents aged 14–15, compared to 77% nationally (Ministry of Education, 2023).

Parental choices illustrate socio-economic divides. SC/ST families continue to rely on government schools, but OBC and General families favour private schools for better English-medium teaching, competitive exam preparation, and peer environments. Even tribal families increasingly choose private schools, citing poor quality and "bad company" in government institutions (Jha & Parvati, 2010) [11].

Government initiatives under Samagra Shiksha and the STARS Project aimed at strengthening ICT, scholarships, and gender-sensitive schemes. Yet, declining infrastructure and high dropout rates remain challenges.

Thus, rural SC/ST adolescents in government schools suffer most, facing poor infrastructure, high dropout, and limited access to digital resources.

Higher Secondary Education in Rajasthan (2018–19 to 2023–24)

Higher secondary education expanded rapidly, reflecting Rajasthan's policy push toward universalizing senior secondary education. Government higher secondary schools rose from 11,263 in 2018–19 to 19,114 in 2023–24 (+70%), while private schools grew marginally from 8,804 to 9,015, with 48% located in urban areas (estimated by the author from UDISE Plus database). By 2023–24, government schools accounted for 68% of all higher secondary institutions.

Enrolment increased from 15 lakh in 2018–19 to 18.8 lakh in 2023–24 (+25%). Government schools absorbed most of this growth, enrolling 13.7 lakh (73%) by 2023–24, while private enrolment stagnated. Girls' enrolment rose from 7.7 lakh to 8.8 lakh (+14%), increasing their share from 43% to 47%. SC and ST girls made notable gains: SC girls rose from 0.72 lakh to 1.0 lakh and ST girls from 0.71 lakh to 0.87 lakh in government rural schools, accounting for 80% of their participation. Meanwhile, urban OBC and General students continued to prefer private schools.

Government schools expanded teacher numbers from 1.18 lakh in 2018–19 to 1.66 lakh in 2023–24 (+40%). Female teachers rose from 49,583 (42%) to 79,553 (48%), showing progress toward gender balance. Private schools, however, saw male teachers decline from 85,084 to 78,454, while female teachers grew modestly, reflecting feminization trends (Kingdon, 2020) [14].

Infrastructure improved substantially in government schools. Electricity coverage grew from 93% to 99%, internet connectivity doubled from 8,078 to 15,847 schools, and playground and library facilities expanded by over 50%. Private schools reported modest gains but stagnated in libraries and playgrounds. Sanitation improved, though 6% of government schools still lacked girls' toilets, disproportionately in rural areas.

Outcomes improved significantly. GER increased from 56.5% in 2018–19 to 62% in 2023–24, surpassing the national average of 56.2% (Ministry of Education, 2023). GPI rose from 0.83 to 0.96, showing narrowing gender gaps. GER for SC students rose from 52.7% to 61.5% and for ST students from 52.9% to 58.5%, though still below the state average. NER also increased from 32.3% to 37.4%.

Parental preferences reflected socio-economic divides. SC/ST families continued to rely on government schools, supported by scholarships such as the Post-Matric Scholarship Scheme, while OBC and General urban families leaned toward private schools for coaching and English-medium opportunities. However, government schools have re-emerged as the dominant provider due to expansion and policy support.

Policies under Samagra Shiksha and Adarsh Yojana strengthened infrastructure, teacher recruitment, and ICT. Schemes such as the Indira Gandhi Scholarship for Single Girl Child and KGBVs promoted girls' participation.

In sum, higher secondary education made the greatest progress, though rural SC/ST students remain disadvantaged in terms of quality and advanced learning resources.

Comparative Conclusion Across All Levels

Across the four levels of schooling, Rajasthan's trajectory between 2018–19 and 2023–24 reveals a dual reality. Access has expanded, gender gaps have narrowed, and SC/ST participation has improved, particularly at higher levels. Government schools remain the backbone of rural education and the principal provider for disadvantaged groups, while private schools increasingly cater to OBC and General urban families.

At the primary and upper primary levels, enrolment gaps narrowed, but SC/ST rural girls remain the most vulnerable, suffering from weak infrastructure and poor learning outcomes. At the secondary level, structural reforms reduced government infrastructure, reinforcing reliance of disadvantaged adolescents on low-quality schools. At the higher secondary level, expansion of government schools and scholarships boosted access, particularly for girls, yet quality gaps persist.

Thus, those who continue to suffer most are rural SC/ST students, especially girls, who face intersecting disadvantages of poverty, weak facilities, and limited access to English-medium education. Rajasthan's policies—Samagra Shiksha, Adarsh Yojana, KGBVs, STARS, and Digital Rajasthan—have mitigated some barriers, but sustained attention to retention, learning outcomes, and equity in quality remains essential.

Table 1: Number of Schools in Rajasthan (Education Level)

Year	Schools					Management		Enrolment					
	PS	UPS	SS	HSS	Total	Govt	Pvt	Primary Boys	Primary Girls	Upper Primary Boys	Upper Primary Girls	Hr. Sec. Boys	Hr. Sec. Girls
1950-51	4336	732		185	5253	5040	213	275000	55000	52000	900	16000	200
1960-61	14548	1416		537	16501	16281	220	899347	215584	179647	28382	78022	8058
1970-71	16379	3297		1107	20783	20201	582	1076364	288622	372081	105865	306706	60301
1980-81	22474	5200	1976	506	30156	29113	1043	1500003	449018	936852	298994	714521	191870
1990-91	30231	8629	2786	947	42593	39095	3498	2140183	944966	1549071	606318	1242521	390592
2000-01	39829	22571	5122	2312	69834	58442	11392	2712350	1973866	2566616	1581439	1798877	833988
2010-11	47818	36788	14945	7616	107167	77976	29191	2363223	2070859	3326555	2826552	3115222	1946687
2020-21	39575	36338	10903	20560	107376	71353	36023	4402364	3917474	2264719	1962198	2514351	2043540

Sources: (a) Progress in Education 1950-51 to 1963-64, Government of Rajasthan, (b) Selected Educational Statistics, MHRD, Government of India. (c) *School education statistics of India and states, 2018–19 to 2023–24*. Unified District Information System for Education Plus.

Table 2: Literacy rate in Rajasthan as well as in India during 1951 to 2011

Year	Rural						Urban						Combined				Total	
	Female		Male		Total		Female		Male		Total		Female		Male			
	Raj.	India	Raj.	India	Raj.	India	Raj.	India	Raj.	India	Raj.	India	Raj.	India	Raj.	India	Raj.	India
1951	NA	4.87	NA	19.02	NA	12.10	NA	22.33	NA	45.60	NA	34.59	2.66	8.86	13.88	27.15	8.50	18.32
1961	3.19	10.10	21.74	34.30	12.95	22.50	26.89	40.50	59.93	66.00	44.55	54.40	7.01	15.35	28.08	40.40	18.12	28.31
1971	4.80	15.50	27.04	48.60	16.44	27.90	34.94	48.80	64.53	69.80	50.82	60.20	10.06	21.97	33.87	45.96	22.57	34.45
1981	6.78	21.70	35.32	49.60	22.47	36.00	41.46	56.30	72.29	76.70	58.05	67.20	14.00	29.76	44.77	56.38	30.11	43.57
1991	11.59	30.17	47.64	56.96	30.37	36.00	50.24	64.05	78.50	81.09	65.33	67.20	20.44	39.29	54.99	64.13	38.55	52.21
2001	37.34	46.70	72.16	71.40	55.34	59.40	64.67	73.20	86.45	86.70	76.20	80.30	43.85	53.67	75.70	75.26	60.41	64.83
2011	45.80	57.93	76.16	77.15	61.44	66.77	70.73	79.11	87.91	88.76	79.68	84.11	52.12	64.63	79.19	80.88	66.11	72.98

Source: Census of India: different census

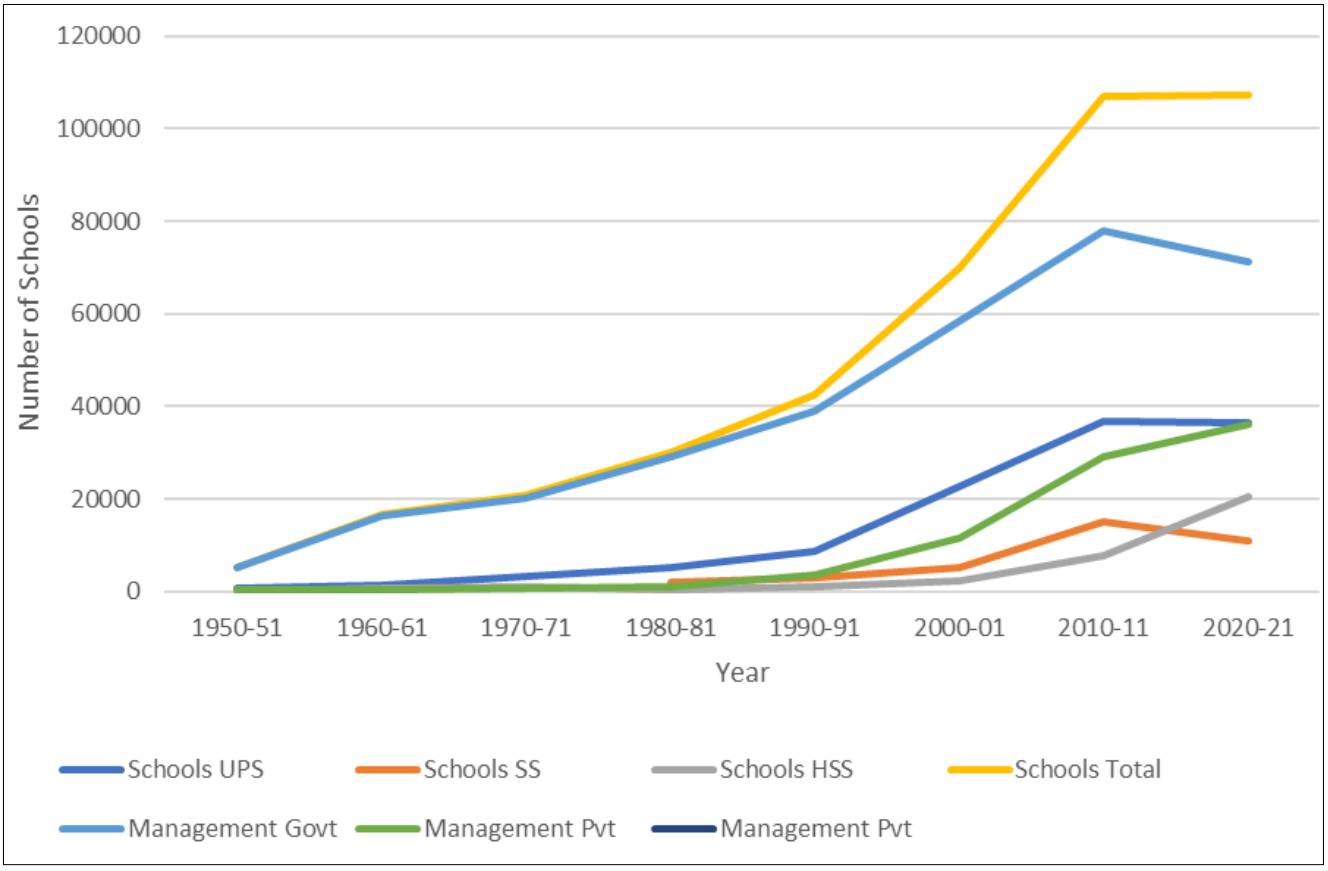

Fig 1: Number of Schools in Rajasthan

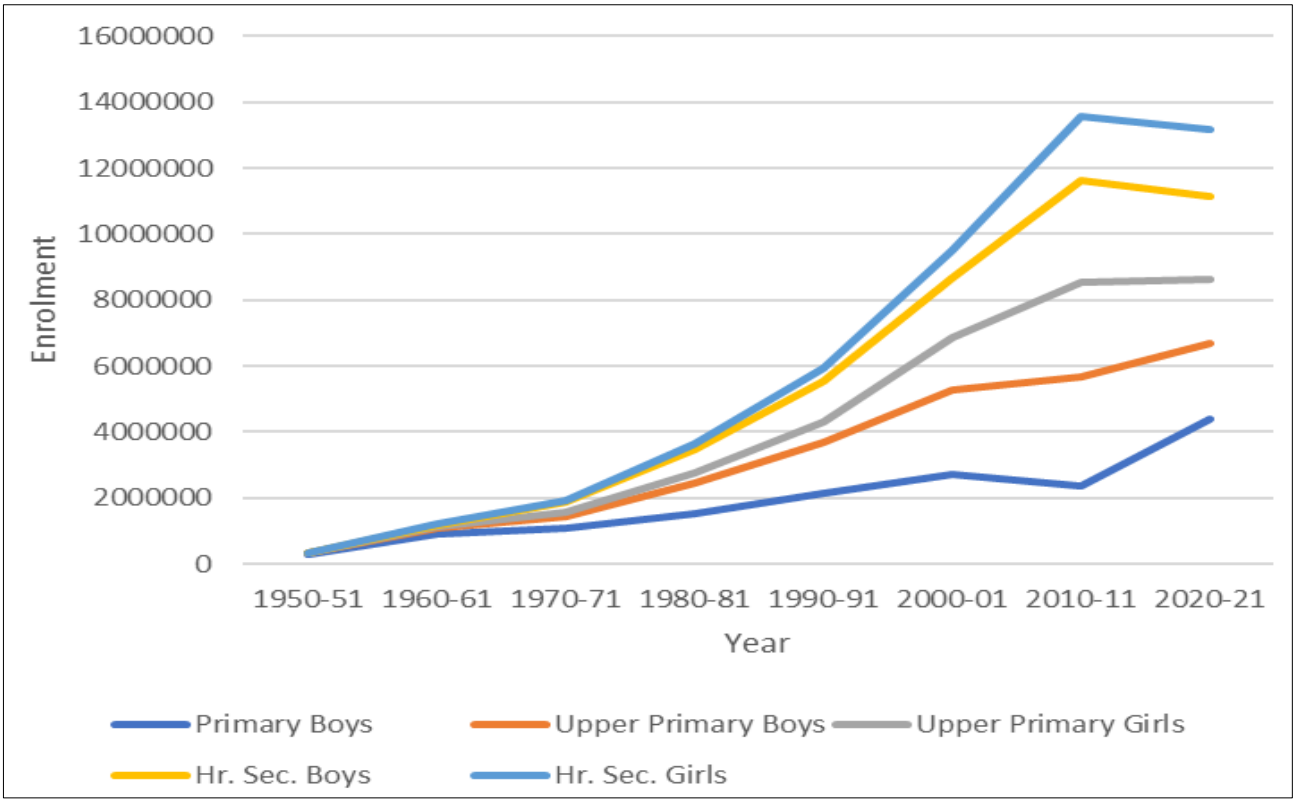

Fig 2: Enrolment in Rajasthan

Conclusion and Policy Implications

Conclusion

The evolution of school education in Rajasthan from 1950 to 2024 demonstrates both remarkable progress and persistent challenges. The state has moved from fragmented, uneven pre-independence structures to near-universal access at the primary level and significant gains in literacy, enrolment, and gender equity. Landmark state-level interventions such as the Shiksha Karmi Project and Lok Jumbish, complemented by national initiatives like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, the Right to Education Act, and Samagra Shiksha, collectively transformed Rajasthan into a laboratory of educational reforms. Recent policy shifts, including the Adarsh Yojana, Digital Rajasthan, and implementation of the NEP 2020, further highlight the state's commitment to modernization and rationalization.

Despite these gains, deep inequities remain across gender, social categories, and rural–urban divides. Analysis of UDISE+ data shows that SC and ST girls in rural areas remain disproportionately concentrated in government schools, which continue to suffer from weak infrastructure, shortages of qualified teachers, and poor learning outcomes. In contrast, OBC and General families—particularly in urban areas—are increasingly migrating to private schools, motivated by perceptions of better quality, English-medium instruction, and competitive advantage. Secondary education emerges as the most fragile stage, with stagnant enrolment, weak retention, and declining infrastructure following consolidation of government secondary schools. In contrast, higher secondary education has demonstrated the strongest progress, with notable improvements in access, gender parity, and digital infrastructure, though quality disparities persist.

Overall, the findings underscore that while Rajasthan has made commendable strides in expanding access and narrowing gender gaps, equity in quality remains elusive. The most disadvantaged continue to be rural SC/ST students, particularly girls, who face intersecting disadvantages of poverty, cultural barriers, and systemic under-resourcing. Without targeted quality improvements, the dual system of government and private schooling risks deepening educational stratification.

Policy Implications

The evidence from Rajasthan's school education system yields several policy lessons relevant for both the state and India more broadly.

- Strengthening Quality in Government Schools. Targeted investments are needed to improve foundational learning outcomes in government schools, particularly in rural areas. This includes continuous teacher training, strengthened accountability mechanisms to reduce absenteeism, and investments in libraries, laboratories, and ICT facilities.
- Addressing Social and Gender Inequities. Policies must prioritize disadvantaged groups, especially SC/ST girls in rural areas, who remain most vulnerable to exclusion and poor-quality education. Expanding residential facilities such as Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas, conditional cash transfers for girls, and gender-sensitive infrastructure (e.g., toilets and safe transport) are essential for retention.
- Revitalizing Secondary Education. With the restructuring of government secondary schools into higher secondary institutions, a policy vacuum has emerged at the secondary stage. Focused strategies are needed to strengthen

transition from upper primary to secondary, reduce dropout rates, and expand vocational pathways aligned with the NEP 2020.

- Balancing Public and Private Provision. The growing reliance on private schools by OBC and General urban families reflects a perceived quality deficit in public schools. Public–private partnerships (PPPs) may be leveraged for innovations in pedagogy and technology, but must be carefully regulated to avoid further stratification.
- Harnessing Digital Reforms. Initiatives like Digital Rajasthan and the STARS Project have expanded ICT access, but disparities remain. Ensuring equitable access to digital devices, localized e-content in regional languages, and teacher capacity-building is critical to bridging the digital divide.
- Integrated Monitoring and Evaluation. A comprehensive monitoring framework linking enrolment, learning outcomes, and equity indicators is necessary to assess progress under schemes such as Samagra Shiksha and the Adarsh Yojana. This would help shift the focus from inputs and access to actual educational outcomes.

In conclusion, Rajasthan's experience illustrates the dual challenge of sustaining access while ensuring equity in quality. Addressing the persistent disadvantages of rural SC/ST students, strengthening secondary education, and improving the quality of government schools will be central to achieving the goals of the National Education Policy 2020 and the Sustainable Development Goal 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education for all.

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