From public to private: understanding the decline in government school enrolment in India (2012–2024)

Amrat Lal Meena
Associate Professor, Motilal Nehru College, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India
Correspondence Author: Amrat Lal Meena
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Abstract
Over the past decade, India has witnessed a significant shift in school enrolment patterns, with a growing proportion of students transitioning from government to private schools. This paper investigates this enrolment shift across 20 major Indian states and all states and union territories combined, using quantitative data from Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE+), maintained by the Ministry of Education, Government of India, MOSPI, and the ASER 2024 report. The analysis identifies and explores key drivers of this trend, including economic indicators such as per capita State Domestic Product (SDP), the prevalence of English-medium instruction in government schools, school infrastructure quality, and comparative learning outcomes. Findings indicate a strong association between higher income levels, better learning outcomes in private schools, and increased enrolment in private institutions. Furthermore, states with a lower proportion of English-medium and well-facilitated government schools experienced sharper declines in government school enrolment. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of this shift for educational equity and public policy, emphasizing the need for systemic reforms to enhance the quality, accountability, and competitiveness of government schools in India.

Keywords: Government schools, Private schools, UDISE+, ASER 2024, MOSPI, per capita State Domestic Product (SDP), Learning outcomes, School infrastructure, Parental choice, Educational access, Privatization of education, India

Introduction

The dynamics of school enrolment in India have witnessed a substantial transformation over the past decade, marked by a discernible shift in student enrolment from government to private schools. This trend, evident across numerous states, challenges the foundational objectives of equitable access and quality education envisioned under national policies such as the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009. Despite consistent public investment in school infrastructure and teacher recruitment, and expanding enrolment drives, government schools have experienced a relative decline in enrolment share—a development with significant implications for the future of public education in India.

Empirical evidence drawn from the Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+) indicates a decline in the proportion of students enrolled in government schools between 2012–13 and 2023–24 in the majority of Indian states. This decline is not uniform and varies significantly across regions, suggesting the influence of underlying socio-economic, access to English-medium instruction and institutional factors. Simultaneously, the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2024 highlights persistent differences in learning outcomes perceptions of school quality between government and private schools—factors that are increasingly shaping parental preferences.

This study undertakes a state-level and all-India analysis of the changing patterns of school enrolment, focusing on 20 selected Indian states alongside national aggregates. By triangulating data from UDISE+, MOSPI, and ASER 2024, the study identifies and evaluates potential determinants of enrolment shifts. These include per capita State Domestic Product (SDP) as a proxy for household purchasing power, the proportion of English-medium government schools, relative infrastructure availability, and learning outcome disparities between public and private schooling systems.

Literature review

The evolving landscape of school enrolment in India has been the subject of extensive research, particularly in the context of parental choice, quality of education, and the growing prominence of private schooling. The literature broadly acknowledges that while the expansion of government schools has played a pivotal role in improving access, especially in rural and underserved areas, the last two decades have seen a steady increase in the demand for private education, even among low-income households (Kingdon, 2007; Tooley & Dixon, 2006; ASER Centre, 2024) [5, 15, 1].

Several studies point to learning outcomes as a key driver of this shift. Analysis from successive ASER reports indicates that students in private schools consistently outperform their counterparts in government schools on basic literacy and numeracy measures (ASER, 2024) [1]. Muralidharan and Kremer (2007) [8] found that private school students in rural India exhibited higher test scores, which were partially

attributed to better teacher attendance and engagement. However, when adjusted for household characteristics, the learning advantage of private schools narrows, suggesting a complex interplay between school quality and household background.

Another significant theme in the literature is the perceived quality and accountability in private schools. Studies by Härmä (2011) [16] and French & Kingdon (2010) [4] argue that private schools, particularly low-fee private institutions, are perceived by parents as more responsive, better managed, and offering more disciplined environments. This perception often outweighs the reality of limited infrastructure or untrained teachers in such schools.

Language of instruction, particularly the provision of English-medium education, has also emerged as a powerful factor in school choice. As English is increasingly associated with economic mobility and better employment prospects, many families prioritize it in their educational decisions (Azam, Chin & Prakash, 2013). Government schools, by contrast, have been slower to adopt English-medium instruction, which contributes to their declining appeal in urban and semi-urban areas.

From a structural perspective, economic factors such as rising household incomes and increased urbanization have been shown to influence the demand for private schooling. Andrabi *et al*. (2008) argue that even marginal increases in household purchasing power can lead to shifts in school preference, particularly when coupled with declining public confidence in state-run schools. In India, states with higher per capita income tend to show stronger trends toward privatization in education (Singh, 2023) [11].

There is also growing attention to infrastructural disparities. While recent UDISE+ data suggest improvements in physical infrastructure in government schools, several studies highlight persisting gaps in facilities such as electricity, digital resources, and classroom maintenance when compared to private schools (Bashir *et al*., 2018). These disparities reinforce public perceptions of private schools as better equipped and more conducive to learning.

However, some scholars caution against an uncritical endorsement of private schooling. Mehrotra & Panchamukhi (2006) argue that increased privatization may exacerbate inequalities, particularly for disadvantaged children who cannot afford private options. Furthermore, unregulated growth of low-cost private schools raises concerns about teacher qualifications, learning standards, and long-term sustainability.

Overall, the literature provides strong support for the hypothesis that the shift from government to private schooling is influenced by a combination of performance-related, perceptual, economic, and infrastructural factors. However, there remains a need for state-level, disaggregated analysis to understand how these factors vary by context—a gap that this paper seeks to address through its empirical examination of enrolment trends across 20 Indian states.

Objectives of the study

The primary objective of this study is to examine the changing patterns of school enrolment in India, with a specific focus on the shift from government to private schools across 20 major states and at the national level. This objective is pursued through the following sub-goals:

- To analyse the trend and magnitude of enrolment shifts from government to private schools between 2012–13 and 2023–24.
- To identify the key drivers contributing to the decline in government school enrolment, such as per capita State Domestic Product (SDP), share of government schools in total schools, presence of English-medium instruction, and disparities in school infrastructure and learning outcomes.
- To discuss the implications of these trends for educational equity, access, and quality, particularly in the context of public education's role in achieving universal and inclusive schooling.
- To propose policy recommendations aimed at strengthening government schools and addressing parental preferences that are driving the shift towards private education.

Data and Methodology

Data sources

The present study employs a secondary data analysis approach using three major datasets that comprehensively capture enrolment trends, economic indicators, and quality-related attributes of school education in India.

First, data on school enrolment and infrastructural provisions were obtained from the Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+) for the academic years 2012–13 and 2023–24. These data provide disaggregated information on the proportion of enrolment in government and private schools, language of instruction as well as infrastructure-related variables such as access to electricity, functional toilets, libraries, and digital resources.

Second, data on state-level economic indicators were sourced from the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MOSPI). Specifically, the study uses Per Capita Net State Domestic Product (NSDP) at current prices base year 2011-12 for the year of 2022-23 as a proxy for household income levels and overall economic capacity at the state level.

Third, quality-related parameters—particularly learning outcomes—were drawn from the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2024. The ASER dataset provides comparative metrics on foundational learning in reading and arithmetic in rural India.

In this analysis, government schools include those managed by the Department of Education, Tribal or Social Welfare Departments, local bodies (such as municipal authorities), and other government-run institutions. Additionally, government-aided schools, which are privately managed but receive substantial financial support from the government, are also included in this category.

Private schools, on the other hand, comprise private unaided schools (both recognized and unrecognized), as well as madarsas, including those recognized by the Waqf Board or Madarsa Board and those that are unrecognized.

Scope of the study

The study covers 20 Indian states (Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and West Bengal), selected based on the availability of consistent time-series data and their demographic and regional representativeness. In addition to state-level analysis, aggregate data for all states and union territories were used to assess the all-India trend. The temporal scope spans an 11-year period from 2012–13 to 2023–24, allowing for a comparative longitudinal assessment.

Variables and operational definitions

The present analysis investigates both the extent of the shift in student enrolment away from government schools and the underlying factors that may account for this trend. The primary dependent variable is the proportion of enrolment in government schools, measured for the academic years 2012–13 and 2023–24. This variable serves as a key indicator of directional change in school choice over time. To explore potential explanatory factors, a set of independent variables has been identified. Economic development is represented by per capita Net State Domestic Product (NSDP), sourced from the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MOSPI). School composition is measured as the ratio of government schools to the total number of schools within each state or union territory, reflecting the structural presence of government institutions in the education system. The medium of instruction is captured through the proportion of government schools offering English as the primary language of instruction, which may influence parental preferences. To assess school quality, a composite of infrastructure indicators is included, focusing on the availability of electricity, digital boards, functional toilets, and libraries in government schools. Finally, learning outcomes are measured using data from ASER 2024, specifically the percentage of Class V students able to read a Standard II-level text or solve a basic division problem. These outcomes are disaggregated by school type to allow for a comparative understanding of performance between government and private institutions.

Analytical framework

The study employs a mixed-methods quantitative framework, incorporating both descriptive and exploratory analytical techniques:

Descriptive trend analysis: A longitudinal comparison of the share of government school enrolment is undertaken across the two time points. Bar charts and line graphs are utilized to depict the direction and magnitude of change across states.

Comparative Analysis: Key indicators related to infrastructure, English-medium provision, and learning outcomes are compared between government and private schools. States are grouped based on the magnitude of enrolment decline to detect patterns in explanatory variables.

Limitations

This study is subject to several limitations inherent to the use of secondary data. First, the reliance on state-level aggregates may mask significant intra-state disparities, particularly rural–urban differences. Second, the absence of student-level or household-level data restricts the capacity to control for socio-demographic variables such as parental education, caste, or gender. Finally, as the study is observational and cross-sectional in nature, it cannot establish causal relationships, but rather offers indicative associations to inform further research and policy exploration.

Trends in enrolment: government and private schools, 2012–13 to 2023–24

The period from 2012–13 to 2023–24 has witnessed a marked transformation in school enrolment patterns in India, characterised by a significant decline in the share of students enrolled in government schools and a concomitant rise in private school enrolment. This section presents a systematic analysis of these shifts at both the national and sub-national levels, drawing on longitudinal data from UDISE+ across 19 major Indian states and all states and union territories collectively.

The enrolment data presented in Table 1 offers compelling evidence of a marked and widespread shift in student enrolment from government to private schools across India over the past decade. At the national level, the proportion of students enrolled in government schools declined from 68.21 percent in 2012–13 to 61.70 percent in 2023–24, reflecting a substantial 6.52 percentage point reduction. This downward trend is indicative of a broader realignment in parental preferences and a progressive erosion of confidence in the public school system.

A closer examination of the state-wise data reveals that 16 out of the 19 states included in the analysis experienced a decline in government school enrolment, highlighting the systemic nature of this shift. The magnitude of decline, however, varies considerably across states, underscoring the influence of local socio-economic, institutional, and policy contexts. States such as Uttarakhand (-16.61 percentage points), Bihar (-13.76), Haryana (-13.38), and Karnataka (-12.50) recorded some of the steepest reductions in government school enrolment shares. These figures suggest a significant retraction of the public education system's appeal, possibly due to stagnation in learning outcomes, inadequate infrastructure, or growing parental aspirations for English-medium and digitally equipped environments—features increasingly associated with private schools.

Conversely, a few states defied the national trend. Gujarat (+4.22 percentage points), Rajasthan (+2.29), and Kerala (+2.27) recorded an increase in the proportion of students enrolled in government schools. These positive deviations suggest that well-executed policy interventions—such as the introduction of English-medium instruction in public schools, improvements in infrastructure, and enhanced community engagement—may help restore trust in government schooling. Kerala, in particular, stands out as a model where sustained public investment, strong school governance, and social endorsement of public education appear to have mitigated the drift toward private provision.

Meanwhile, states like West Bengal experienced a relatively marginal decline (-1.13 percentage points) and continue to maintain a high share of government school enrolment (88.80% in 2023–24). This persistence reflects either a slower penetration of private schooling options or a more entrenched public schooling culture, especially in rural areas.

Overall, the analysis of Table 1 clearly affirms the research objective by demonstrating that the trend of declining government school enrolment is both significant and widespread, and that the magnitude of this shift is state-contingent, reflecting a mix of demand-side aspirations and supply-side constraints. These findings reinforce the need for nuanced, context-sensitive policy responses that address both the structural deficiencies of public education and the evolving expectations of India's increasingly aspirational population.

Table 1: Change in enrolment share in government schools (2012–13 to 2023–24)

State	2012–13 (%)	2023–24 (%)	Change (percentage points)
All India	**68.21**	**61.70**	**-6.52**
Andhra Pradesh	53.94	43.87	-10.08
Assam	80.69	74.97	-5.72
Bihar	96.16	82.40	-13.76
Chhattisgarh	78.72	69.54	-9.18
Gujarat	57.46	61.68	4.22
Haryana	53.23	39.85	-13.38
Himachal Pradesh	69.66	58.32	-11.34
Jharkhand	78.48	71.77	-6.72
Karnataka	66.54	54.04	-12.50
Kerala	70.18	72.45	2.27
Madhya Pradesh	65.64	57.07	-8.57
Maharashtra	79.53	70.63	-8.90
Odisha	87.67	79.68	-8.00
Punjab	55.18	50.19	-4.99
Rajasthan	47.64	49.93	2.29
Tamil Nadu	61.44	53.39	-8.05
Uttar Pradesh	55.04	49.40	-5.65
Uttarakhand	59.60	42.99	-16.61
West Bengal	89.93	88.80	-1.13

Source*:** Author's Calculation based on Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+) Reports from 2012-13 to 2023-24, Ministry of Education, GOI. ** 2023-24 data include for Andhra Pradesh and Telangana for the sake of comparison

Furthermore, the divergence among states points to the importance of context-specific governance practices, community engagement, and targeted interventions. The contrasting case of Odisha, where government school enrolment has increased, provides a potentially instructive example of how policy and institutional reform can shape public perceptions and reinforce trust in the government school system.

In sum, the observed trends underscore the urgent need for comprehensive policy responses aimed at revitalising public education, addressing quality deficits, and ensuring that government schools remain viable and competitive providers of foundational learning.

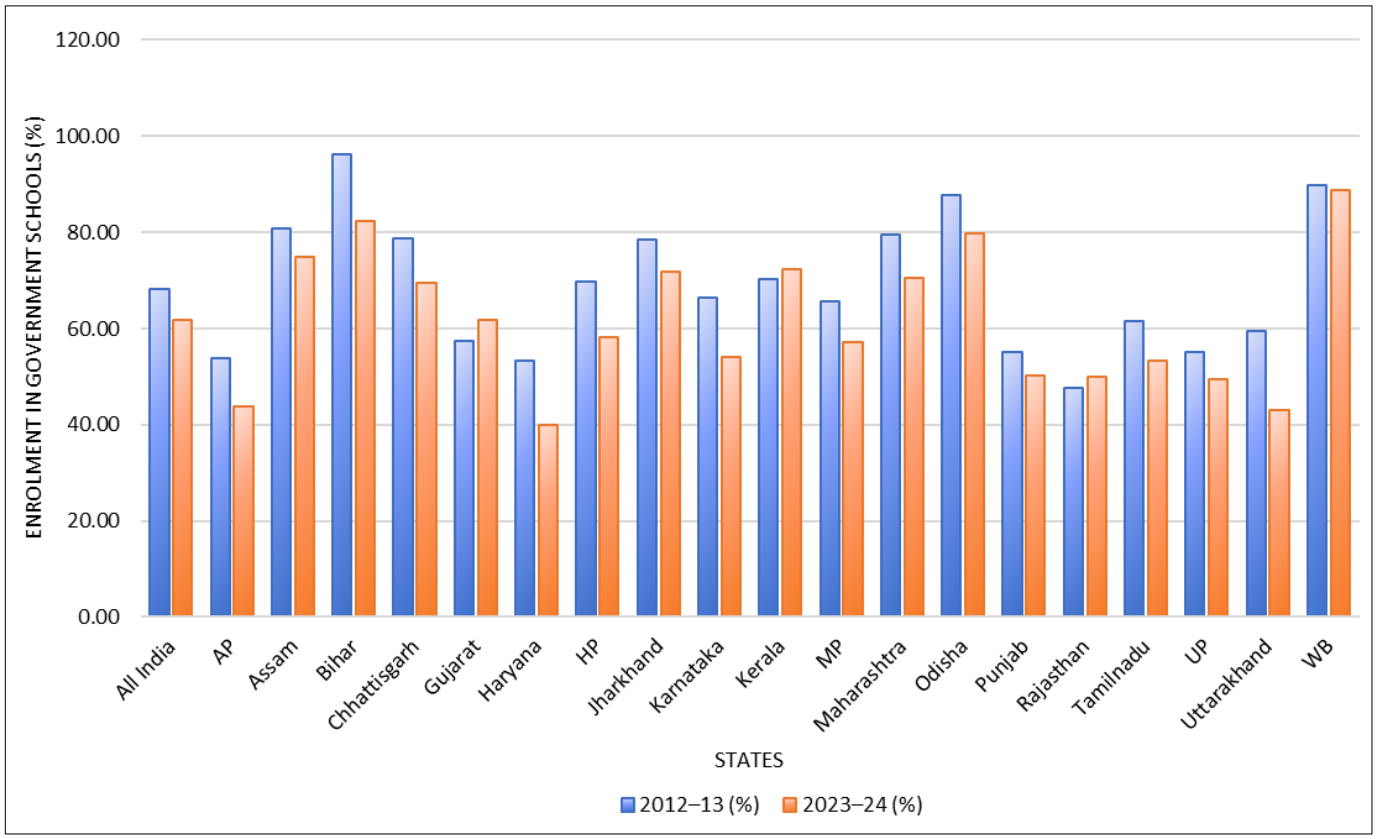

Fig 1: State-wise Share of Enrolment in Government Schools in 2012-13 and 2023-24 (%)

Key drivers of the shift in enrolment from government to private schools

The decline in government school enrolment across Indian states during the period 2012–13 to 2023–24 is a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by a combination of socioeconomic and institutional determinants. Based on a comparative analysis of 20 states, this section examines the key factors associated with the enrolment shift, namely:

- Economic status as captured by per capita State Domestic Product (SDP),
- Structural composition of schools,
- Prevalence of English-medium instruction in government schools,
- Infrastructural disparities between government and private schools,
- Learning outcomes reported in the ASER 2024 survey.

Economic prosperity and household choice: per capita SDP

One of the most significant structural factors influencing school enrolment patterns is economic prosperity, as proxied by per capita Net State Domestic Product (NSDP). Table 2 demonstrates a clear inverse relationship between per capita NSDP and the proportion of students enrolled in government schools across Indian states. This suggests that rising household income levels tend to reduce reliance on public schooling, enabling greater uptake of private education, which is often associated with better infrastructure, English-medium instruction, and stronger accountability.

Statistical analysis further substantiates this relationship. The Pearson correlation coefficient between per capita NSDP and government school enrolment is r = -0.53 (p = 0.014), indicating a moderate, statistically significant negative correlation. This implies that, on average, states with higher economic output per capita tend to have lower proportions of students enrolled in government schools.

Empirical examples underscore this pattern. States such as Haryana (₹296,592), Telangana (₹312,522), and Karnataka (₹304,474)—all among the most economically advanced—report low government school enrolment shares of 39.85%, 39.19%, and 54.04%, respectively. In contrast, economically weaker states such as Bihar (₹53,478) and Jharkhand (₹96,449) continue to rely heavily on government schooling, with enrolment shares of 82.40% and 71.77%, respectively.

However, deviations from this trend are also evident. For instance, Kerala, despite its relatively high per capita NSDP of ₹252,662, reports 72.45% government school enrolment. This suggests that economic affluence does not necessarily lead to privatisation, especially when strong state-led educational interventions and public trust in government schooling exist. Kerala's sustained investment in public education, promotion of English-medium instruction in government schools, and community involvement may explain its divergence from the general trend.

Table 2: Enrolment Share in Government Schools and Per Capita NSDP by State, 2023–24

State	Ratio of enrolment in government schools (%)	Per Capita NSDP (2022-23)[1] (Rs.)
All India	61.7	150906
Andhra Pradesh	47.77	219881
Assam	74.97	119308
Bihar	82.40	53478
Chhattisgarh	69.54	137329
Gujarat	61.68	272451
Haryana	39.85	296592
Himachal Pradesh	58.32	218788
Jharkhand	71.77	96449
Karnataka	54.04	304474
Kerala	72.45	252662
Madhya Pradesh	57.07	132010
Maharashtra	70.63	252389
Odisha	79.68	143768
Punjab	50.19	181678
Rajasthan	49.93	150653
Tamil Nadu	53.39	277802
Telangana	39.19	312522
Uttar Pradesh	49.4	84126
Uttarakhand	42.99	230994
West Bengal	88.8	139442

***Source*:** Author's Calculation based on Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+) Reports 2023-24, Ministry of Education, GOI. [1] Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MOSPI) *Per Capita Net State Domestic Product (NSDP) at current prices base year 2011-12* for the year of 2022-23

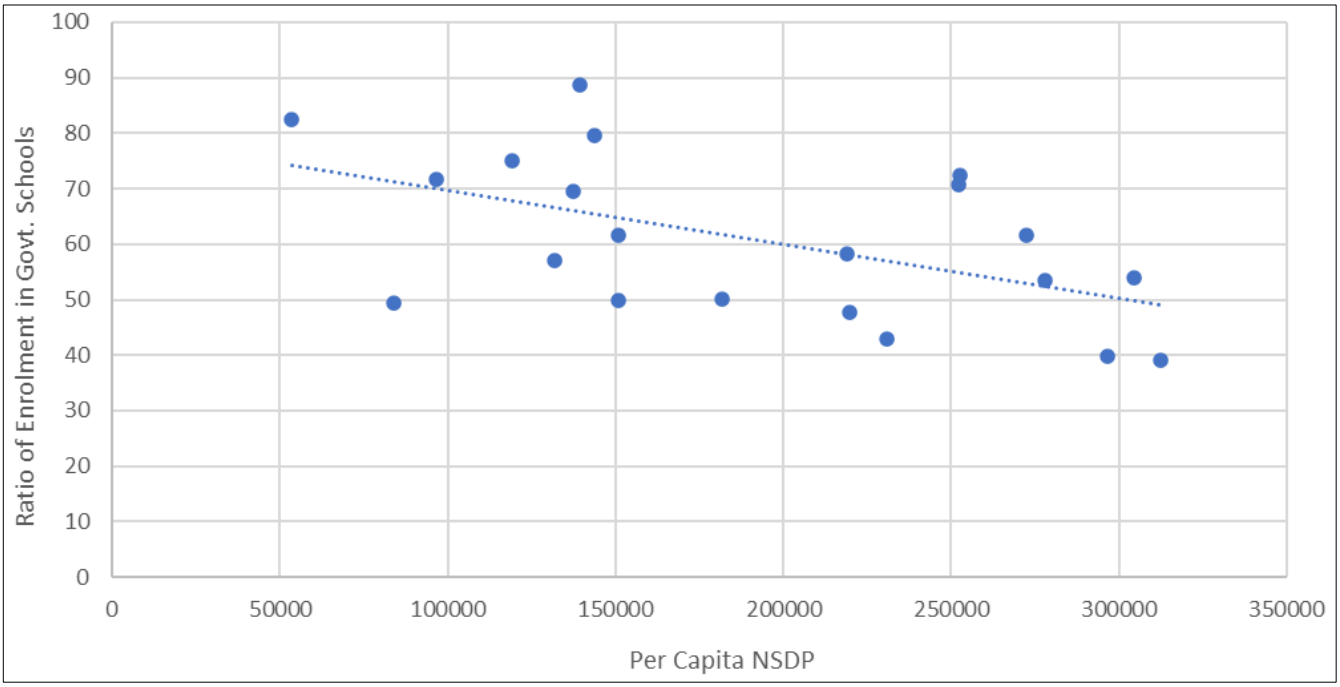

Fig 2: Enrolment Share in Government Schools and Per Capita NSDP by State, 2023–24

Thus, while economic prosperity is a strong predictor of enrolment shift, it interacts with other critical variables such as public-school quality, policy design, and availability of private alternatives. Policymakers must recognise that household economic capacity enables, but does not determine, school choice. Strengthening the quality and perception of government schools can counteract the effects of income-based flight to the private sector.

Structural composition: ratio of government to total schools

Table 3 presents the change in the ratio of government schools to total schools in India between 2012–13 and 2023–24. It reflects the evolving institutional landscape in school education, where the role of private providers has grown steadily over the past decade.

At the national level, the share of government schools declined

from 79.52% in 2012–13 to 74.60% in 2023–24, representing a drop of nearly 5 percentage points. This contraction in the relative share of government institutions highlights the gradual expansion of private schooling infrastructure, either through establishment of new private schools or closure/merging of government schools in low-enrolment areas.

State-level data reveal considerable variation in this trend. Some states, such as Bihar (-14.18 percentage points), Uttar Pradesh (-13.77), and Haryana (-8.03), witnessed significant reductions in the proportion of government schools. These states also reported substantial declines in government school enrolment (as shown in Table 1), suggesting a correlation between the shrinking institutional footprint of public education and enrolment losses. In these contexts, the supply-side contraction of government schools may have further accelerated the shift toward private options, particularly in regions where public schools have been merged, under-resourced, or perceived to offer lower quality education.

Conversely, a few states show an increase in the share of government schools. Assam (4.02 percentage points), Gujarat (3.72), Punjab (2.73), and Kerala (1.94) have expanded or maintained their government school base relative to private providers. Interestingly, some of these states—especially Kerala—also exhibit relatively stable or even increasing government school enrolment. This may indicate more effective public provisioning or policies that have helped retain student confidence in government schooling.

Table 3: Ratio of government schools to total schools (2012–13 to 2023–24)

	Ratio of Government Schools (2012-13) (%)	Ratio of Government Schools (2023-24) (%)	Change (Percentage Points)
All India	79.52	74.60	-4.93
Andhra Pradesh	73.22	73.53	0.32
Assam	79.46	83.48	4.02
Bihar	97.45	83.27	-14.18
Chhattisgarh	89.82	86.93	-2.88
Gujarat	71.12	74.84	3.72
Haryana	69.17	61.14	-8.03
Himachal Pradesh	86.07	85.36	-0.71
Jharkhand	91.15	83.06	-8.09
Karnataka	77.84	74.23	-3.61
Kerala	73.52	75.46	1.94
Madhya Pradesh	80.97	75.37	-5.59
Maharashtra	86.33	82.53	-3.80
Odisha	93.34	88.47	-4.88
Punjab	69.11	71.84	2.73
Rajasthan	69.16	65.18	-3.99
Tamil Nadu	80.15	78.31	-1.84
Uttar Pradesh	70.77	57.00	-13.77
Uttarakhand	77.23	74.56	-2.66
West Bengal	87.39	87.69	0.30

Source*:** Author's Calculation based on Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+) Reports from 2012-13 to 2023-24, Ministry of Education, GOI. ** 2023-24 data include for Andhra Pradesh and Telangana for the sake of comparison

Overall, the data in Table 3 suggest that the institutional landscape is shifting in tandem with enrolment patterns, with the relative decline of government schools potentially reinforcing parental perceptions of weakening public education. It also implies a structural reconfiguration of the education market, where private schools are not only expanding enrolment share but also physical presence, especially in urban and peri-urban areas. This raises important questions about equity, access, and the ability of government schools to compete in a more diversified and privatized educational environment.

In the context of this study, Table 3 strengthens the argument that both demand- and supply-side factors are contributing to the enrolment shift away from government schools. It underlines the need for a revitalized policy focus on school infrastructure, rationalization of school networks, and quality improvement in government schools to reverse or mitigate this trend.

Medium of instruction: proportion of English-medium government schools

Table 4 provides valuable insights into how the availability of English-medium instruction influences household preferences for government versus private schools. As English increasingly functions as a proxy for quality, modernity, and future opportunity, its absence in the public school system has become a critical factor in the declining preference for government schools across many Indian states.

At the national level, only 6.77 percent of government schools offer English-medium instruction, in stark contrast to 40.77 percent of private schools. This significant discrepancy reflects a systemic limitation within the government schooling sector, which is increasingly unable to meet parental aspirations, particularly among economically upwardly mobile and urban households. The linguistic gap has thus become a key driver in the erosion of enrolment and trust in public schools.

The data show that in states where English-medium instruction is almost entirely absent in government schools, enrolment declines have been among the steepest. For instance, Bihar (0.15% English-medium in government schools), Jharkhand (0.39%), and Madhya Pradesh (0.40%) have some of the lowest English-medium adoption in government schools and have concurrently experienced sharp declines in public school enrolment. These states exhibit a widening gap between what public schools offer and what parents demand, pushing households toward the private sector, where the provision of English-medium education is significantly higher—46.83% in Bihar, 51.81% in Jharkhand, and 37.41% in Madhya Pradesh.

Table 4: Share of English-medium schools by management type, 2023–24

	Government	Private
All India	6.77	40.77
Andhra Pradesh	18.00	80.76
Assam	4.48	23.72
Bihar	0.15	46.83
Chhattisgarh	1.21	42.32
Gujarat	0.84	32.24
Haryana	1.70	54.74
Himachal Pradesh	1.41	76.89
Jharkhand	0.39	51.81
Karnataka	2.89	61.40
Kerala	6.09	90.14
Madhya Pradesh	0.40	37.41
Maharashtra	1.12	73.54
Odisha	2.09	35.73
Punjab	1.16	37.55
Rajasthan	4.05	25.42
Tamil Nadu	16.88	94.42
Telangana	14.42	88.46
Uttar Pradesh	2.34	13.06
Uttarakhand	0.74	37.06
West Bengal	2.06	16.23

***Source*:** Author's calculation based on Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+) Reports 2023-24, Ministry of Education, GOI.

In contrast, states that have adapted to this linguistic shift have been more successful in retaining students within the government system. For example, Andhra Pradesh (18%), Tamil Nadu (16.88%), and Telangana (14.42%) have proactively introduced English-medium instruction in government schools and, as a result, exhibit relatively higher levels of parental retention in public education. This underscores that where the public system aligns itself with evolving household aspirations, preference for government schools can be preserved or even strengthened.

Interestingly, Kerala remains an outlier in this trend. Despite having a relatively modest share of English-medium instruction in government schools (3.91%), it continues to retain a high proportion of students in the public system. This exception suggests that language of instruction is a key but not exclusive determinant of preference for government schools—factors such as perceived quality, governance, teacher accountability, and historical trust also play crucial roles.

In conclusion, Table 4 demonstrates that parental preference for government schools is increasingly shaped by the availability of English-medium education. Where public schools have failed to adapt linguistically, they have seen enrolment decline; where they have responded to this demand, they have remained more competitive. This has profound policy implications, indicating that language reform in public education is essential not only for equity and access but also for restoring public confidence in government schools.

Learning outcomes: performance gap in foundational skills

Table 5 highlights a fundamental factor influencing the enrolment shift from government to private schools in India—the persistent and wide learning gap between students in the two sectors. Drawing on data from the ASER 2024 report, the table presents comparative figures for foundational learning outcomes across 19 states, specifically focusing on students' ability to perform basic division and read a Grade II-level text. These indicators serve as reliable proxies for educational quality at the primary level.

At the national level, the differences in learning outcomes are striking. Only 26.5 percent of government school students can perform division, compared to 41.8 percent in private schools. Similarly, in reading, 44.8 percent of students of class Vth in government schools are able to read a Grade II-level text, as opposed to 59.3 percent of private school students. These substantial gaps in basic competencies are not merely statistical; they significantly influence parental perceptions of quality and effectiveness, often compelling families to exit the public system in search of better outcomes for their children.

State-level trends reinforce this national picture. In Bihar, for example, just 32.5 percent of government school students can perform division, while 67.7 percent of private school students achieve the same—a learning gap of 35.2 percentage points. Similar disparities are observed in Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh, where private schools consistently outperform government schools across both learning indicators. These gaps lend empirical support to the widely held perception that private schools offer superior learning environments, even though this may not always correlate with teacher qualifications or infrastructure.

Interestingly, a few states challenge this trend. In Kerala, Punjab, and Odisha, the learning differentials are narrower, and in some instances, government school performance is relatively strong. For instance, in Kerala, 58.2 percent of government school students can read a Grade II text compared to 71.7 percent in private schools—a notable performance given the national average. Odisha also shows encouraging figures, with 57.2 percent of government students reading at grade level, indicating the effectiveness of targeted policy interventions and sustained public investment.

Table 5: Foundational learning outcomes in government and private schools, 2024

State	Percentage of Students of class Vth can division (2024) (%)		Percentage of Students of class Vth can read a text book of Strander II (2024) (%)	
	Government	Private	Government	Private
All India	26.5	41.8	44.8	59.3
Andhra Pradesh	35.1	35.1	37.5	38.5
Assam	12	30.9	32.8	55.8
Bihar	32.5	67.7	41.2	66.2
Chhattisgarh	22.9	41.5	52.3	65.8
Gujarat	13.1	25.2	44.6	61.7
Haryana	29.4	56.9	53.9	72.9
Himachal Pradesh	47	55.8	70.1	73.1
Jharkhand	25.5	52.3	40.3	68.2
Karnataka	19.3	25.6	32.8	37.8
Kerala	12.4	27.6	58.2	71.7
Madhya Pradesh	16.9	33.2	37.5	58.1
Maharashtra	26.1	29.8	57.9	61.8
Odisha	29.7	62.1	57.2	82.3
Punjab	50	57.7	66	67.9
Rajasthan	12.3	37.2	37.7	63.5
Tamil Nadu	20.2	22.1	37	32.3
Telangana	23.9	27.5	29.3	35.6
Uttar Pradesh	31.8	51.2	50.5	65.6
Uttarakhand	35.4	48.9	60.3	71.5

Source: Author's Calculation based on Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2024.

The data in Table 5 confirm that the learning gap is a decisive factor in declining public-school enrolment, particularly in states where the quality gap is widest. As parents become more aware of these disparities—through community feedback, media, or NGO assessments—they are more likely to withdraw their children from underperforming government schools and place them in private institutions, even at significant financial cost. This dynamic is especially evident in urban and peri-urban areas, where the supply of private schools is growing and households are more aspirational.

In conclusion, Table 5 demonstrates that the quality differential in learning outcomes is not just an educational issue but a key driver of systemic change in school enrolment patterns. Addressing this gap—through pedagogical reform, teacher accountability, and classroom-level learning support—is essential for revitalising public confidence in government schools and arresting the enrolment shift toward private providers.

Infrastructure quality: comparative advantage of private schools

Table 6 provides a comparative assessment of the infrastructural facilities available in government and private schools across Indian states, highlighting disparities that may contribute to the observed enrolment shift away from public schooling. The analysis considers six key indicators: availability of functional toilets for boys and girls, electricity, libraries, desktops, and digital boards.

Table 6: School facilities in government and private schools, 2023–24

State	Percentage of Schools having functional Boy toilet (2023-24)		Percentage of Schools having functional Girl toilet (2023-24)		Percentage of Schools having functional Electricity (2023-24)		Percentage of Schools having Library (2023-24)		Percentage of Schools having Desktop (2023-24)		Percentage of Schools having Digital board (2023-24)	
	Government	Private	Government	Private	Government	Private	Government	Private	Government	Private	Government	Private
All India	87	93	92	93	90	90	87	76	28	64	3	6
Andhra Pradesh	81	98	97	99	100	100	99	100	23	94	8	22
Assam	85	68	86	68	93	54	85	50	13	30	1	1
Bihar	88	93	91	94	77	84	43	61	7	52	0	4
Chhattisgarh	83	98	91	98	90	98	98	89	14	63	1	4
Gujarat	91	98	92	98	100	100	98	84	71	92	1	5
Haryana	90	99	95	99	99	99	100	91	34	85	1	6
Himachal Pradesh	98	99	99	99	99	100	98	96	33	89	1	6
Jharkhand	94	96	96	98	92	93	97	77	10	64	1	3
Karnataka	93	98	97	99	98	99	98	95	32	79	1	8
Kerala	97	99	99	100	100	100	97	95	77	95	20	18
Madhya Pradesh	84	93	86	93	82	94	100	93	8	66	1	5
Maharashtra	87	98	91	98	86	99	93	93	69	94	8	11
Odisha	95	95	98	97	95	98	100	99	23	74	13	9
Punjab	92	97	96	98	100	100	72	93	98	94	5	4
Rajasthan	82	85	86	84	89	93	75	68	33	66	1	3
Tamil Nadu	75	95	93	95	100	96	100	96	48	84	18	48
Telangana	71	98	84	99	89	100	84	90	25	85	1	8
Uttar Pradesh	93	92	94	92	88	80	93	60	7	42	1	2
Uttarakhand	84	90	85	88	88	96	92	90	61	78	0	3
West Bengal	97	97	99	98	98	93	81	60	17	43	0	2

***Source*:** Author's Calculation based on Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+) Reports 2023-24, Ministry of Education, GOI.

In terms of basic infrastructure, such as functional toilets and electricity, government schools have largely achieved parity with their private counterparts. On average, 87 percent of government schools have functional toilets for boys compared to 93 percent in private schools, while 92 percent of government schools offer functional toilets for girls, closely aligned with the 93 percent in private institutions. Electricity access is similarly equitable, with both sectors reporting approximately 90 percent coverage nationally. In some states, government schools even outperform private schools; for instance, in Assam, 93 percent of government schools are electrified compared to only 54 percent of private schools. These findings suggest that core infrastructure is no longer a primary differentiator between public and private schools in many regions.

However, the gap widens considerably when it comes to educational resources and digital infrastructure. The availability of school libraries is higher in government schools (87%) than in private schools (76%), indicating a positive outcome of past policy emphasis on foundational learning resources in the public sector. States such as Kerala (97% vs. 95%) and Odisha (100% vs. 99%) exemplify this trend. Despite this advantage, government schools lag significantly in access to desktops and digital boards, which are critical in today's technology-integrated learning environment. Only 28 percent of government schools report having desktops, in contrast to 64 percent of private schools. The gap is particularly stark in states like Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh, where fewer than 10 percent of government schools are equipped with desktops. A similar pattern is observed in the availability of digital boards, which remain limited in both sectors but are more prevalent in private schools (6% vs. 3% nationally). Some exceptions exist in progressive states like Tamil Nadu (18% of government schools) and Kerala (20%).

This differential access to digital infrastructure highlights a persistent technological divide between government and private schools, which likely influences parental perceptions and preferences. While basic amenities are now relatively standardized, the limited presence of modern learning tools in public institutions may be contributing to the enrolment shift towards the private sector, particularly in aspirational and urban contexts. Addressing this gap through targeted investment in digital infrastructure and ICT-based pedagogy in government schools is critical to enhancing their competitiveness and reversing enrolment decline.

Policy implications and recommendations

The empirical evidence presented in this study reveals a substantial and sustained decline in the proportion of enrolment in government schools across several Indian states over the period 2012–13 to 2023–24. This trend, driven by economic, institutional, linguistic, infrastructural, and pedagogical factors, calls for a comprehensive policy response aimed at revitalising public education. Drawing on the observed inter-state variations and the associated indicators of quality and access, this section outlines policy implications and offers evidence-based recommendations to arrest and potentially reverse the decline in public school enrolment.

Enhancing foundational learning in government schools

The persistent gap in foundational learning outcomes between government and private schools, as highlighted in the ASER 2024 survey, constitutes one of the most critical challenges to the credibility of public education. In states such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, the percentage of Class V students in government schools able to read a Class II-level text remains substantially lower than in private schools.

To address this learning deficit, it is imperative to:

- **Prioritise early-grade competency acquisition:** National and state education departments should align existing programmes such as National Mission on Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (NIPUN) Bharat with state-specific learning trajectories, ensuring universal attainment of foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) by Grade III.
- **Strengthen assessment-informed instruction:** Periodic low-stakes assessments should inform differentiated instructional strategies, allowing teachers to tailor support to students' learning levels.
- **Invest in continuous professional development:** Structured, sustained, and practice-oriented in-service teacher training—particularly for primary-grade educators—is essential to improve pedagogical effectiveness.

Responding to parental demand for English-medium education

The data reveal a positive correlation between the proportion of English-medium government schools and the retention of students in the public system. In states like Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, the expansion of English-medium instruction in government schools has contributed to relatively lower declines in enrolment.

In response, policy should:

- **Introduce phased bilingual models:** A gradual transition from regional languages to English as the medium of instruction, with the support of bilingual teaching aids, can ease the shift without compromising comprehension.
- **Ensure teacher readiness:** Training modules in English proficiency and bilingual pedagogy must be integrated into both pre-service and in-service teacher education programmes.
- **Align curriculum and pedagogy:** The development of culturally responsive and age-appropriate English-language learning materials should accompany medium-of-instruction reforms.

Bridging infrastructure gaps between government and private schools

While government schools have improved access to basic infrastructure such as toilets and drinking water, significant disparities persist in the availability of learning-enabling facilities, including libraries, science laboratories, and digital boards. These gaps contribute to perceptions of inferior quality in public institutions.

To mitigate these disparities:

- **Conduct infrastructure gap audits:** State education departments should undertake regular audits comparing government and private school infrastructure across districts to guide resource allocation.
- **Target investment in learning-focused resources:** Infrastructure funding should prioritise facilities that have a demonstrable impact on learning, particularly in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) and digital education.
- **Strengthen School Management Committees (SMCs):** Community-based monitoring through SMCs can promote accountability in infrastructure utilisation and maintenance.

Rebuilding public confidence in government schools

Beyond tangible deficits, the erosion of trust in government schooling is shaped by parental perceptions of inefficiency, indiscipline, and low accountability.

To address this:

- **Enhance transparency and public reporting:** State governments should develop and disseminate school-level performance dashboards, including data on learning outcomes, teacher attendance, and infrastructure status.
- **Recognise and scale best practices:** High-performing government schools—particularly in states like Odisha—should be identified as model institutions and supported to disseminate effective practices.
- **Foster stakeholder engagement:** Regular forums for parent-teacher interaction and community feedback can foster mutual accountability and improve school responsiveness.

Contextualising policy responses to state-specific trends

Given the wide inter-state variation in both enrolment shifts and explanatory factors, decentralised and context-sensitive policy responses are necessary.

- **Learning from successful states:** States that have recorded an increase in government school enrolment, such as Odisha, may offer valuable insights into effective public-school governance, teacher deployment, and community participation.
- **Diagnostic reviews in declining states:** States with sharp enrolment declines should undertake comprehensive diagnostics to identify administrative, pedagogical, and infrastructural bottlenecks.

Regulating the expanding private sector

The rise of low-cost private schools, while offering alternatives, has introduced new challenges related to quality assurance and equity.

Policy responses should include:

- **Enforcing minimum standards:** Regulatory frameworks must ensure compliance with basic norms related to infrastructure, safety, and teacher qualifications in private schools.
- **Integrating private schools into public assessments:** To ensure comparability and public accountability, private schools should be included in state and national-level learning assessments.
- **Exploring strategic partnerships:** Where appropriate, well-designed Public-Private Partnership (PPP) models may be considered to expand access and improve quality, provided they are accompanied by strong regulatory oversight.

In conclusion, reversing the decline in government school enrolment requires not merely increased investment, but strategic, evidence-based reform. Strengthening foundational learning, responding to linguistic aspirations, improving infrastructure, rebuilding trust, and addressing inter-sectoral disparities are essential steps in restoring government schools as credible and aspirational institutions for India's children. The future of universal and equitable education depends on a revitalised public schooling system capable of delivering high-quality learning outcomes at scale.

Conclusion

This study has examined the shifting patterns of school enrolment from government to private schools across 20 Indian states and at the all-India level between 2012–13 and 2023–24. Drawing on secondary data from UDISE+, MOSPI, and ASER 2024, the analysis highlights a significant and widespread decline in the share of enrolment in government schools, particularly in economically advanced states. While some states, such as Odisha, have witnessed increases in public school enrolment, the broader national trend suggests a growing preference for private schooling.

The empirical evidence underscores that this shift is neither abrupt nor monolithic. Rather, it is shaped by a constellation of interrelated factors including rising per capita income, expanding demand for English-medium education, differences in infrastructure quality, and most notably, learning outcome disparities between government and private schools. The analysis demonstrates that in states where the government school sector has maintained a higher proportion of English-medium instruction and relatively better performance on foundational learning metrics, the decline in enrolment has been more moderate or even reversed.

These findings carry important implications for education policy and planning. While the growth of private schools may reflect parental aspirations and the responsiveness of market-based providers, it also signals a crisis of confidence in the public schooling system. The continued migration toward private schools threatens to exacerbate educational inequality, particularly for students from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds who remain dependent on government provisioning.

Addressing this challenge requires a multi-pronged strategy focused on improving foundational learning in early grades, strengthening teacher capacity, modernising infrastructure, and increasing public accountability. Importantly, policy responses must be contextualised to local realities, recognising the considerable inter-state heterogeneity in both the extent of enrolment shifts and their underlying drivers.

In sum, the revitalisation of government schools is not only essential for ensuring equitable access to quality education, but also for preserving the constitutional mandate of universal, free, and compulsory education. Without urgent and sustained policy attention, the enrolment shift documented in this paper may deepen existing divides in the Indian education system, with long-term consequences for social mobility and national development.

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