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NITI Aayog Report Highlights Sharp Decline in Government Schools and Rising Concerns Over Equitable Access to Education

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Recent Developments:

- A recent **NITI Aayog** report highlighted that nearly **94,000 Government Schools** have closed across India over the past decade, averaging about **25 school closures per day**, raising concerns over equitable access to education.
- During the same period, **Government School enrolment** declined by **2.26 crore students**, while their share in total school enrolment fell from **71% (2005)** to **49.24% (2024–25)**.
- The trend has intensified concerns regarding **educational access, social equity, neighbourhood schools and effective implementation of the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009**.

School Education Framework in India:

National Education Policy (NEP), 2020:

- **National Education Policy (NEP), 2020** replaced the **National Policy on Education, 1986**, introducing a comprehensive framework covering education from **Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)** to higher education.
- The policy introduced the **5+3+3+4 curricular and pedagogical structure** aligned with children's developmental stages.
- While supporting **school rationalisation**, the policy clearly emphasises that the principle of **Neighbourhood Schools** should not be compromised during institutional consolidation.
- The policy also focuses on **Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN)** through the **NIPUN Bharat Mission**, multidisciplinary learning, experiential education and improved learning outcomes.

Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009:

- The **Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009** guarantees **free and compulsory elementary education** for children aged **6–14 years** under **Article 21A** of the Constitution.
- The Act mandates **25% reservation** for children belonging to **Economically Weaker Sections (EWS)** and disadvantaged groups in private unaided schools.
- The Act prohibits **physical punishment, screening procedures during admission, capitation fees and arbitrary detention**, while prescribing norms for school infrastructure and **Pupil-Teacher Ratio (PTR)**.

UDISE+ (Unified District Information System for Education Plus):

- **UDISE+** is an online **Management Information System (MIS)** launched by the **Ministry of Education** during **2018–19** for comprehensive school-level data collection.
- The platform collects information relating to **school infrastructure, teacher availability, enrolment, learning facilities and student progression** across Government and Private Schools.

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- The database serves as an important evidence base for educational planning, monitoring and policy evaluation.

Extent of Government School Closures:

School Rationalisation under NEP 2020:

- Many States have justified school closures as part of **school rationalisation**, aiming to consolidate institutions with persistently low enrolment.
- Although **NEP 2020** supports rationalisation for improving resource utilisation, it simultaneously requires preservation of the **Neighbourhood School** principle.
- The magnitude of closures suggests that administrative restructuring, alongside demographic changes and urban migration, has significantly influenced school availability.

National Trends:

- According to **UDISE+**, the number of **Government Schools** declined from **11.07 lakh (2014–15)** to **10.17 lakh (2023–24)**.
- During the same period, the number of **Private Schools** increased from **2.88 lakh** to **3.31 lakh**, indicating a gradual shift towards private schooling.
- The changing enrolment pattern reflects increasing parental preference for private education, particularly where Government Schools face infrastructure or quality-related challenges.

States Most Affected:

Madhya Pradesh:

- Around **7.37 lakh children** were identified without school records, indicating significant gaps in educational tracking.
- Nearly **11.38 lakh children** were placed under the **Drop Box** category, while **1.23 lakh children** had already dropped out of school.
- Approximately **1.55 lakh children** discontinued education due to **migration or displacement**.
- More than **3,500 Government Schools** reported **zero new admissions**, while nearly **6,500 schools** admitted fewer than **10 students**.
- State outreach initiatives, including **School Chalen Hum** and the **Home Contact Campaign**, reportedly failed to reach nearly **7.5 lakh children**.

Uttar Pradesh:

- The number of **Government Schools** declined from **1.63 lakh** to **1.38 lakh** between **2018–19** and **2019–20**, representing one of the largest annual reductions among States.

Jamm& Kashmir:

- More than **4,300 schools** were merged or closed under the rationalisation process.
- The number of schools declined from **23,167 (2020–21)** to **18,785 (2022–23)**.
- Many children now travel **4–6 kilometres** daily to attend school, weakening the **Neighbourhood School** principle envisaged under the **RTE Act**.
- Around **13,000 teacher vacancies** continue to affect classroom teaching and learning outcomes.

Impact of Government School Closures:

Educational Inequality:

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- **Government Schools** remain the primary educational institutions for **Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs)** and economically weaker sections.
- Closure of nearby schools disproportionately affects children lacking access to private education or reliable transportation.

Rise in Dropout Rates:

- Longer travel distances, poor accessibility and financial constraints contribute to higher dropout rates, particularly in rural, tribal and remote regions.
- Migration, displacement and poverty further disrupt continuity in children's education.

Gender Dimension:

- Girls are more vulnerable to discontinuing education when schools become distant because of concerns relating to **safety, mobility and household responsibilities**.
- Reduced accessibility may widen existing gender disparities in school participation.

Decline in Educational Quality:

- Consolidated schools frequently experience **teacher shortages**, requiring a single teacher to manage multiple classes.
- Such arrangements violate **RTE norms relating to Pupil-Teacher Ratio (PTR)** and adversely affect classroom learning.

Marginalisation of Vulnerable Communities:

- Studies based on the **National Sample Survey (NSS)** indicate declining access to free education among **Muslim, SC and ST households**, increasing educational disparities.
- Reduced public educational access weakens the objective of inclusive and equitable education.

Governance and Accountability Issues:

Role of States:

- Since **Education** falls under the **Concurrent List**, State Governments are primarily responsible for school administration, recruitment and rationalisation policies.
- States determine school restructuring based on local demographic and administrative requirements.

Role of the Union Government:

- The **Right to Education Act, 2009** establishes the national legal framework guaranteeing elementary education.
- The Union Government influences State education through **financial assistance, Centrally Sponsored Schemes, NEP implementation and national policy guidelines**.
- Ensuring equitable educational access therefore requires continuous cooperation between the **Union and State Governments**.

Limitations of the Right to Education Framework:

Implementation Challenges:

- The **RTE Act** guarantees access to education but contains relatively limited enforceable provisions regarding learning quality.

- Poor and rural families often lack institutional awareness and legal capacity to effectively claim educational rights.
- **School Management Committees (SMCs)**, intended to strengthen community participation and accountability, remain weak in many regions.
- Consequently, statutory guarantees have not always translated into effective educational outcomes.

Way Forward:

Key Priorities:

- School rationalisation should balance **administrative efficiency, educational access, equity and learning outcomes**.
- The **Neighbourhood School** principle should remain central while restructuring Government Schools.
- Teacher vacancies should be filled on priority to maintain prescribed **Pupil-Teacher Ratio (PTR)**.
- **School Management Committees (SMCs)** should be revitalised through capacity building and greater community participation.
- Monitoring of **out-of-school children**, migrant children and vulnerable groups should be strengthened through real-time data systems.
- Greater **Centre-State cooperation**, sustained public investment and improved governance are essential to realise the constitutional vision of **universal, equitable and quality education**.

UPSC Mains Linkages:

Essay Themes:

- **Quality Education as the Foundation of Inclusive Development.**
- **Education and Social Equity in India.**
- **Neighbourhood Schools and the Constitutional Promise of Equal Opportunity.**

Value Addition for UPSC:

Important Constitutional Provisions:

- **Article 21A** – Right to Free and Compulsory Education.
- **Article 45** – Early Childhood Care and Education.
- **Article 46** – Promotion of Educational Interests of Weaker Sections.
- **Article 41** – Right to Education within the State's Economic Capacity.

Important Schemes and Initiatives:

- **Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan** – Integrated school education programme covering pre-primary to Class XII.
- **PM SHRI Schools** – Model schools for implementing the objectives of **NEP 2020**.
- **NIPUN Bharat Mission** – Universal **Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN)** by Grade 3.
- **Vidyanjali Programme** – Community and volunteer participation for improving Government Schools.

International Linkage:

- **Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4** aims to ensure **inclusive, equitable and quality education** and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

Important Supreme Court Judgments:

- **Mohini Jain v. State of Karnataka (1992)** recognised education as integral to the **Right to Life** under **Article 21**.

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- **Unnikrishnan J.P. v. State of Andhra Pradesh (1993)** recognised the **Right to Education** up to **14 years**, which subsequently led to the insertion of **Article 21A** through the **86th Constitutional Amendment Act, 2002**