

**LIST SESSION 3**

# **The Foundational Learning Journey**

*Progress, Persistent Gaps, and Teaching at the Right Level under NEP 2020*

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## Editorial Note

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This article has been prepared by CRISP from the address delivered by Dr Rukmini Banerji to the CRISP team on September 11, 2026, the third session of LIST – Lectures for India's Social Transformation series. It has been rendered in the speaker's own voice and organised for publication. It preserves the substance, examples, and data presented in the lecture and arranges the argument thematically. Numerical figures cited in the text are as presented by the speaker from ASER, NIPUN Bharat and PARAKH data sources during the lecture.

## Abstract

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India's foundational learning journey has, since 2020, been organised around the National Education Policy's new 5+3+3+4 structure, which for the first time brings the pre-primary years (age 3 to 6) within a national policy mandate and sets a goal of universal preschool provisioning by 2030. This lecture uses ASER, NIPUN Bharat and PARAKH data to take stock of that journey: rising but geographically uneven preschool enrolment; a fragmented institutional landscape at age five; divergent state strategies for pre-primary provisioning, illustrated through Bihar, Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh; the more consistent enforcement of age-six entry into Grade I; and a sharp divergence in outcomes by grade band — marked, non-incremental gains in Grades I–II reading and arithmetic between 2022 and 2024, partial recovery to pre-COVID trend lines in Grades III–V, and a decade of stagnation in Grades VI–VIII.

Against this backdrop, the lecture presents Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL), a Pratham-developed, evidence-based method that regroups children by assessed learning level rather than age or grade for a portion of the school day, citing outcomes from state and district implementations between 2023 and 2024. An extended discussion follows, addressing the governance of early childhood education across the Ministries of Women and Child Development and Education, the appropriate institutional home for three- and four-year-olds, the relationship between teacher motivation, technology and system-level alignment, inclusion of children with special needs, multi-grade multi-level teaching, and assessment design for the youngest learners. The lecture closes by situating India's experience within a global learning crisis and TaRL's international expansion.

**Keywords:** NEP 2020; foundational literacy and numeracy; ASER; NIPUN Bharat; Teaching at the Right Level; early childhood education; middle-school stagnation; inclusion; assessment

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## 1. Introduction: Taking Stock of the Foundational Learning Journey

I want to begin with a stock-take: how far India has come on its foundational learning journey, what challenges remain, and a solution I will describe as timely and already underway in parts of the country. My presentation today is data-heavy, and I have organised it within the framework of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, tracking progress against that policy's own benchmarks since its release.

I will speak throughout in a dual register, as a researcher and as a practitioner. I have been associated with the Pratham Education Foundation since 1996, directed the ASER Centre from 2005 to 2014 (during which period it conducted the Annual Status of Education Report, India's largest citizen-led household survey of children's schooling and learning), and subsequently served as Pratham's Chief Executive Officer, overseeing large-scale learning partnerships with state governments across the country.

## 2. NEP 2020: A New Architecture for the Early Years

NEP 2020 introduces a new pedagogical and curricular structure, replacing the earlier '10+2' system with a '5+3+3+4' structure defined by stages rather than only by grades: a foundational stage (the pre-primary years, age 3 to 6, together with Grades I and II), a preparatory stage (Grades III to V), and a middle stage (Grades VI to VIII). This lecture is confined to that 3-to-14 age range — there is already a great deal to address within it.

The most significant step in this new structure is the formal inclusion of the pre-primary years within a national policy mandate for the first time. The importance of early childhood education has long been established by research and practical experience, but NEP 2020 formally brings early childhood education into education policy. The idea of a 'stage' spanning several grades, rather than a single grade with its own curriculum, is itself a concept worth unpacking and building as states move forward in translating policy into practice.

**Figure — NEP 2020: the '5+3+3+4' structure**

| Stage       | Foundational |     |                   | Preparatory   |                |                 | Middle          |                 |                        |
|-------------|--------------|-----|-------------------|---------------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|------------------------|
| Age / Grade | 3–4          | 4–5 | 5–6 (pre-primary) | 6–7 (Grade I) | 7–8 (Grade II) | 8–9 (Grade III) | 9–10 (Grade IV) | 10–11 (Grade V) | 11–14 (Grades VI–VIII) |

*Figure 1. NEP 2020 replaces the '10+2' structure with a '5+3+3+4' structure defined by stages: Foundational (age 3–8, pre-primary years + Grades I–II), Preparatory (Grades III–V, age 8–11), Middle (Grades VI–VIII, age 11–14).*

The policy sets a goal of universal preschool provisioning by 2030, so that children entering Grade I share a broadly comparable prior experience. It deliberately avoids prescribing a single pathway, leaving states free to design their own provisioning structures, while specifying that the year immediately before Grade I should take the form of a preparatory class or *balvatika*, staffed by a teacher qualified in early childhood education.

### 3. Pre-Primary Provisioning: Enrolment Trends and Institutional Choices

#### 3.1 National enrolment trends, 2018–2024

Using ASER 2024 data, a household survey covering almost every rural district in the country, we see that preschool enrolment has risen steadily across the 2018–2024 period, despite two years (2020–2022) in which anganwadis and schools were closed nationally. By 2024, about 77% of three-year-olds and 83% of four-year-olds were enrolled in some form of preschool.

| Age   | Enrolled 2018 | Enrolled 2022 | Enrolled 2024 | Not enrolled 2018 | Not enrolled 2022 | Not enrolled 2024 |
|-------|---------------|---------------|---------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Age 3 | 68.1%         | 75.8%         | 77.4%         | 28.8%             | 21.7%             | 20.7%             |
| Age 4 | 76.0%         | 82.0%         | 83.4%         | 15.6%             | 12.3%             | 11.4%             |
| Age 5 | 58.5%         | 62.2%         | 71.4%         | 8.1%              | 5.5%              | 6.2%              |

Table 1. Pre-school/ECE coverage in rural India, ASER 2018–2024. Preschool coverage includes anganwadis, pre-primary classes in government schools, and private LKG/UKG classes.

Children not enrolled in any preschool in the 3-to-5 age range are concentrated in a small number of states, principally Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Bihar, where large numbers of three-year-olds in particular remain outside the anganwadi system.

| Age group | Uttar Pradesh | Rajasthan | Bihar |
|-----------|---------------|-----------|-------|
| Age 3     | 52.1%         | 35.2%     | 23.1% |
| Age 4     | 30.0%         | 19.6%     | 14.6% |
| Age 5     | 14.9%         | 8.1%      | 8.8%  |

Table 2. Concentration of non-enrolment among 3–5 year-olds in selected states, ASER 2024 (% of children not enrolled in any kind of preschool or ECE centre).

This matters because anganwadis provide far more than early learning exposure: they remain the primary channel through which children receive immunisation, health monitoring and nutrition. A child excluded from the anganwadi system is therefore typically excluded from all of these simultaneously, not from early learning alone.

#### 3.2 Age five: a mixed institutional landscape

Age five is one of the most interesting ages in Indian education today, since it is the year immediately preceding Grade I and the year in which enrolment is most fragmented across institution types. Drawing on 2024 data, a little over one-third of five-year-olds are enrolled in anganwadis, slightly under one-third in private pre-primary classes, about 14% in government schools, and the remainder in government pre-primary sections or not enrolled anywhere.

**Figure — % young children in each age group, by pre-school/school type — All-India (rural), ASER 2024**

| Age | Anganwadi | Govt. LKG/UKG | Pvt. LKG/UKG | Govt. School | Pvt. School | Other | Not in School |
|-----|-----------|---------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|-------|---------------|
| 3   | 66.8      | 2.0           | 8.6          | 1.2          | 0.8         | 0.0   | 20.7          |
| 4   | 57.7      | 3.3           | 22.4         | 2.9          | 2.2         | 0.2   | 11.4          |
| 5   | 37.0      | 4.9           | 29.5         | 14.1         | 8.0         | 0.4   | 6.2           |
| 6   | 10.7      | 4.1           | 19.0         | 42.9         | 19.3        | 0.6   | 3.3           |
| 7   | 1.8       | 1.1           | 8.6          | 58.5         | 27.5        | 0.6   | 1.8           |
| 8   | 0.5       | 0.2           | 3.2          | 64.1         | 30.2        | 0.7   | 1.1           |

Figure 2 / underlying data. % of children in each age group in different types of pre-schools and schools, All-India (rural), ASER 2024.

The Grade I teacher has to deal with the fact that children come into formal school with varied exposure to early childhood education: some children arrive from anganwadis, some from private preschools, some already inside a formal school system, and a smaller number with no prior institutional experience at all. Over time, as NEP 2020 gets translated into practice and provision patterns mature, we can expect greater uniformity in patterns of five-year-olds' enrolment in the year before they move into formal school.

### 3.3 Three states, three strategies

Given the current status of pre-primary schooling patterns and the recent push from NEP 2020 to systematically organise the 'foundational stage' of the system, we see wide diversity in provisioning patterns across states. Three contrasting cases illustrate this, comparing 2018 with 2024 provision for early childhood education.

| State            | Year | Anganwadi | Govt. pre-primary | Private LKG/UKG | Govt. school | Not enrolled anywhere |
|------------------|------|-----------|-------------------|-----------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| Bihar            | 2018 | 36.4%     | 0.7%              | 17.0%           | 27.4%        | 11.5%                 |
| Bihar            | 2024 | 48.3%     | 0.4%              | 18.4%           | 19.1%        | 8.8%                  |
| Gujarat          | 2018 | 54.9%     | 2.3%              | 11.8%           | 23.0%        | 2.7%                  |
| Gujarat          | 2024 | 54.4%     | 23.8%             | 14.5%           | 4.9%         | 1.3%                  |
| Himachal Pradesh | 2018 | 15.8%     | 5.9%              | 36.2%           | 21.4%        | 1.7%                  |
| Himachal Pradesh | 2024 | 7.4%      | 27.9%             | 50.1%           | 6.2%         | 1.3%                  |

Table 3. Three states, three strategies: shifts in age-five enrolment patterns across institutions, ASER 2018 and 2024 (illustrative cases).

In Bihar, anganwadi enrolment rose from roughly 36% to nearly 50% of five-year-olds, alongside a fall in the proportion of children entering Grade I too early. The state's main achievement has been pulling more children into the preschool net while reducing under-age Grade I entry.

Gujarat showed a different pattern: anganwadi coverage stayed broadly stable at just over half, while a strong state push to introduce balvatika sections within government schools produced a large shift into

school-based pre-primary provision between 2022 and 2024, alongside a corresponding fall in under-age Grade I entry.

Himachal Pradesh illustrated a third pattern. Anganwadi enrolment, already comparatively low, fell further, because the state had introduced pre-primary sections into government primary schools well before NEP 2020, around 2017–18, so that school-based pre-primary, alongside a substantial private pre-primary sector, forms the dominant channel there.

These three cases make a broad point: rather than a single national template, states are weighting anganwadis and school-based provision differently depending on where they started, and any single prescription risks misreading this variation.

## 4. Age of Entry, Parental Education and School Readiness

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A parallel development worth highlighting is the serious enforcement of age-six entry into Grade I. Although the 6-to-14 age band has long been the typical definition of India's school-age population, enrolment data show many under-age children entering Grade I in past years. Between 2018 and 2024, the proportion of Grade I children aged five or under fell from about 25% to 16–17%, a decline visible in both government and private schools. This structural shift — children entering formal schooling at a cognitively more prepared age — is expected to translate into better learning outcomes as these cohorts move through the system.

Another demographic shift is worth mentioning: the share of mothers of young children (age 3 to 8) with no schooling fell from about 43% in 2014 to 24% in 2024, with over 64% of such mothers now having more than primary schooling. This rise in parental schooling can be connected to a widespread increase in family engagement in children's learning as a result of the pandemic-induced school closures. Since schools reopened after COVID, several state governments have included parent-focussed interventions to support learning improvement programmes. These include Maharashtra's school-readiness melas and mohalla mothers' groups, Himachal Pradesh's Pehle Shikshak Maa orientation programme (reaching some 24,000 young mothers), Punjab's quarterly and monthly mother–teacher activity workshops for pre-primary sections, and Chhattisgarh's Angna Me Shiksha programme.

## 5. Grades One and Two: The NIPUN Bharat Effect

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As a policy document, NEP 2020 has been clear and direct in prioritising Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN), stating that this must be achieved by Grade III. Although the NIPUN Bharat mission was launched in 2020 with a 2025 target, implementation activity intensified only after 2022; the clear goals of NEP 2020, alongside the early release of a National Curriculum Framework specifically for the foundational stage, provided impetus for translating policy into practice.

To assess India's progress in FLN, ASER's one-on-one oral assessment tools are used. For reading, this is a progressive tool with the highest task being a Grade II-level text. For arithmetic, there is a task for Grade II-level (the proxy is a two-digit subtraction with borrowing) and a further tier at roughly Grade IV-level

division. These tools are administered in the language of instruction used in government schools in that state.

**Figure — Grade III: nationally, big improvement in foundational literacy and numeracy — All-India (rural), ASER 2014–2024**

| Year | Reading at least Std II level text (%) | Solving at least subtraction, Std II level (%) |
|------|----------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| 2014 | 23.6                                   | 25.3                                           |
| 2016 | 25.1                                   | 27.6                                           |
| 2018 | 27.2                                   | 28.1                                           |
| 2020 | — (COVID period, no ASER round)        | — (COVID period, no ASER round)                |
| 2022 | 20.5                                   | 25.9                                           |
| 2024 | 27.0                                   | 33.7                                           |

Figure 3. Grade III learning gains, All-India (rural), ASER 2014–2024 (2020 omitted: COVID period, no ASER round).

| Percentage-point gain, 2022→2024 | Reading | Arithmetic |
|----------------------------------|---------|------------|
| Government schools               | +7.1 pp | +7.4 pp    |
| Private schools                  | +2.4 pp | +4.4 pp    |

Government schools gained roughly three times the private-school gain over the same period.

*“This is the first time since we’ve been doing ASER, which is almost 20 years, that we see both the fact that you can make a big jump in just a two-year period, and that a large part of this gain is coming from government schools.”*

The learning gains seen between 2022 and 2024 are unusual across nearly two decades of ASER data, both for their size and for the extent to which government schools accounted for them. For many reasons, the gain can be attributed to the operational push behind NIPUN Bharat between 2022 and 2024. In the speaker's own words, she is “holding her breath” for the 2026 ASER round to see whether this momentum has been sustained — each cohort passing through the system should ideally outperform the cohort before it.

## 6. Grades Three to Eight: Recovery, Stagnation and the Case for Urgency

Turning to Grades III–V: NEP 2020 sets universal FLN as a goal by the end of primary school, ideally by Grade III, but by Grade V at the latest, yet the intensity of policy attention and resourcing has not been as strong as that given to Grades I–II. ASER 2024 data show Grade V reading and arithmetic levels returning to pre-COVID (2018) levels, but without moving meaningfully beyond that earlier trend line, unlike the sharper gains seen for earlier grades.

What accounts for the different experience for different cohorts? Children in Grade III in 2024 were a fully post-COVID cohort with no schooling disruption and the full benefit of the NIPUN push, whereas children in Grade V in 2024 had lost roughly two years of schooling continuity along the way. Even so, government

schools again showed larger percentage-point gains than private schools in this age band, albeit from a lower base, with considerable variation across states.

**Figure — Grade V: learning ‘recovery’ since COVID, in reading and arithmetic — All-India (rural), ASER 2018, 2022 & 2024**

| Year | % reading at least Std II level | % solving at least division (3-digit/1-digit) |
|------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| 2018 | 50.5                            | 27.9                                          |
| 2022 | 42.8                            | 25.6                                          |
| 2024 | 48.8                            | 30.7                                          |

Figure 4. Grade V learning recovery since COVID, All-India (rural), ASER 2018, 2022 and 2024 (children from all government and private schools).

| Learning-level improvement by school type, 2022→2024 | 2022 | 2024 | Pc-point increase |
|------------------------------------------------------|------|------|-------------------|
| Reading (≥ Grade II text) — Govt schools             | 38.5 | 44.8 | +6.3 pp           |
| Reading (≥ Grade II text) — Private schools          | 56.8 | 59.3 | +2.5 pp           |
| Arithmetic (3-digit ÷ 1-digit) — Govt schools        | 21.6 | 26.5 | +4.9 pp           |
| Arithmetic (3-digit ÷ 1-digit) — Private schools     | 38.7 | 41.8 | +3.1 pp           |

Government schools gained roughly double the private-school gain in both subjects between 2022 and 2024.

The picture for Grades VI–VIII is more worrying. For 2024, both ASER and the PARAKH National Achievement Survey, despite differing methodologies, samples and testing approaches, show basic reading and arithmetic proficiency in middle school as essentially flat between 2014 and 2024, with only a modest COVID-linked dip in between.

**Figure — Grades VI–VIII: learning levels have barely moved in a decade — % who can do a 3-by-1-digit division problem, All-India (rural)**

| Year | Grade VI (%) | Grade VII (%) | Grade VIII (%) |
|------|--------------|---------------|----------------|
| 2014 | 32.2         | 37.9          | 44.1           |
| 2018 | 34.7         | 39.0          | 43.9           |
| 2022 | 31.6         | 37.6          | 44.6           |
| 2024 | 36.0         | 41.7          | 45.7           |

Figure 5. % children enrolled in Grades VI–VIII who can at least do a 3-by-1-digit division problem, All-India (rural). Learning levels have barely moved in a decade, and the gap between Grade VI and Grade VIII remains only 10–12 percentage points.

PARAKH proficiency-level data show a similar pattern: a considerably higher share of Grade III children reaching expected proficiency than Grade VI children, and a lower share again by Grade IX.

**Figure — PARAKH 2024 National Achievement Survey — % of children at proficiency level, by grade and subject**

| Class / Subject    | National (%) |
|--------------------|--------------|
| Class 3 — Language | 57           |
| Class 3 — Maths    | 65           |

| Class / Subject               | National (%) |
|-------------------------------|--------------|
| Class 6 — Language            | 41           |
| Class 6 — Maths               | 28           |
| Class 6 — The world around us | 42           |
| Class 9 — Language            | 23           |
| Class 9 — Maths               | 5            |
| Class 9 — Science             | 5            |
| Class 9 — Social science      | 12           |

Figure 6. PARAKH 2024 National Achievement Survey: percentage of children at proficiency level, by grade and subject. ASER methodology is unchanged over 20 years and is therefore comparable over time; PARAKH/NAS is not always comparable across rounds for every grade.

This stagnation is of great concern precisely because children continue to advance through the grade structure without acquiring the basic reading and arithmetic skills that later grades assume.

*“If the kids don't have their basic foundations in place in Class 3, Class 5, in middle school, then it's very difficult for them to reach towards the grade-level outcomes that are expected of them.”*

## 7. Teaching at the Right Level: My Answer as a Practitioner

### 7.1 The evidence base

Moving into what I think of as my ‘implementation practitioner’ hat, I want to introduce Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) as Pratham's response to the problem of children advancing through grades without foundational skills. We developed TaRL in India over roughly fifteen years ago and it has been evaluated through six or seven randomised controlled trials. It was named one of two recommended ‘smart buys’ for improving learning in low- and middle-income countries by the Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel (GEEAP) in its 2023 report — a recognition that reflects the approach's relevance well beyond India.

Figure 7. GEEAP (2023), *Cost-Effective Approaches to Improve Global Learning*: TaRL is named one of the panel's recommended ‘smart buys.’

### 7.2 How TaRL reorganises the classroom

The case for TaRL can be illustrated by ASER data. For example, in ASER 2024 data for Grades III–V: even though close to half of Grade V children read at least at Grade II level, roughly 30% remain unable to read more than isolated letters or words despite having reached Grade V — a degree of within-grade heterogeneity that a single grade-based lesson simply cannot address. A child who is aware of falling this far behind classmates is at risk not only academically, but this gap also reduces the child's belief in their own capacity to learn.

Figure — % children by grade and reading level — All-India (rural), ASER 2024 (~200,000 children assessed)

| Grade     | Not able to recognize letters | Recognize letters, not words | Read words, not sentences | Read paragraph at Grade I level but not higher | At least read Grade II level text |
|-----------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Grade III | 8.2                           | 22.6                         | 22.2                      | 20.0                                           | 27.0                              |
| Grade IV  | 5.0                           | 15.1                         | 18.0                      | 22.0                                           | 40.0                              |
| Grade V   | 4.1                           | 11.7                         | 14.2                      | 21.3                                           | 48.7                              |

Figure 8. % children by grade and reading level, All-India (rural), ASER 2024. In Grade V, more than half the class is at least three to four grade levels below where they should be: 15% cannot yet read words, another 14% can read words but not sentences, and 21% can only read short paragraphs.

In order for ‘catch up’ to happen, TaRL’s core principle is to reorganise children, not by age or grade (‘by rows’) but by assessed learning level (‘by columns’). This can be done for 1–2 hours during the school day or at any other time. Existing teachers are used rather than additional staff. The ASER-type tool — a simple oral assessment — groups children by level, and available teachers are allocated to level-groups rather than to grades for that period. Because children in these older grades are cognitively more capable despite being behind, they tend to move through levels quickly once taught at the level they are actually at. As children progress, it is important to reassess and regroup at intervals rather than treat them as fixed categories.

| 1. Assess                                                                          | 2. Group                                                                     | 3. Teach                                                                                     | 4. Reassess                                                                |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Simple one-on-one assessment groups children by current learning level, not grade. | Children grouped by level. Available teachers allocated to each level-group. | Activities and materials matched to each group's level — big group, small group, individual. | Progress tracked periodically; children re-grouped as they move up levels. |

Figure 9. Teaching at the Right Level: key elements — (1) one-on-one assessment groups children by level; (2) groups are formed by current learning level and teachers allocated accordingly; (3) activities and materials are matched to each group's level; (4) periodic reassessment tracks progress and re-groups children, with a final assessment at the end of the programme.

### 7.3 Results across states

Programme or implementation data from Punjab, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and a number of district-level partnerships in the 2023–24 school year show that endline improvements can typically be in the range of 20 to 30 percentage points over baseline, achieved over teaching periods as short as 30 to 100 days. These gains are far larger than the normal annual rate of learning growth reflected in ASER trend data.

| Partnership            | Teaching days | Grade(s) | Reading gain (baseline → endline) | Arithmetic gain (baseline → endline) |
|------------------------|---------------|----------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Punjab                 | 60            | III–V    | 41% → 68% (+27 pp)                | 74% → 88% (+14 pp)                   |
| Andhra Pradesh         | 90            | III–V    | 16% → 45% (+29 pp)                | 53% → 88% (+35 pp)                   |
| Uttar Pradesh*         | 100           | IV–V     | 32% → 68% (+36 pp)                | 30% → 70% (+40 pp)                   |
| Bihar*                 | 90            | IV–V     | 32% → 51% (+19 pp)                | 53% → 71% (+18 pp)                   |
| Satara, Maharashtra    | 30            | III–V    | 73% → 83% (+10 pp)                | 86% → 92% (+6 pp)                    |
| Dharashiv, Maharashtra | 40            | III–V    | 63% → 75% (+12 pp)                | 85% → 92% (+7 pp)                    |

| Partnership                  | Teaching days | Grade(s) | Reading gain (baseline → endline) | Arithmetic gain (baseline → endline) |
|------------------------------|---------------|----------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Daman & Diu / DNH            | 90            | III–V    | 20% → 69% (+49 pp)                | 51% → 89% (+38 pp)                   |
| Changlang, Arunachal Pradesh | 100           | III–V    | 23% → 39% (+16 pp)                | 73% → 90% (+17 pp)                   |
| Khunti, Jharkhand            | 90            | VI–VII   | 44% → 75% (+31 pp)                | 51% → 84% (+33 pp)                   |

*Table 4. TaRL implementation outcomes across selected government partnerships, academic year 2023–24. Reading gain measured as ability to read at least a Std II-level text (story); arithmetic gain measured as ability to do 2-by-2 subtraction with borrowing or higher. \*In Uttar Pradesh and Bihar (RRSA 2.0 partnerships), TaRL was implemented with children in Std IV–V; reading figures for Uttar Pradesh are calculated as % of children able to read a Std I-level text (para).*

## 8. Governance, Inclusion and Language: An Extended Discussion

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The discussion that followed the lecture ranged widely across the governance of early childhood education, inclusion, language policy, technology, assessment and multi-grade teaching. The responses are organised thematically below.

### 8.1 Who should lead early childhood: WCD or Education?

Asked which ministry, Women and Child Development (WCD) or Education, should lead early childhood education, I see no single correct prescription, because enrolment and provisioning patterns vary considerably across states. I cited Odisha, where anganwadi coverage has historically been high even among five-year-olds, and where the state has more recently introduced shishu-vatikas (pre-primary sections within schools), creating a genuine tension: if a school-based pre-primary class cannot be given a qualified teacher, the effort risks being diluted regardless of which department nominally leads it. The more useful question for each state is not who leads on paper, but how the two departments concretely divide responsibility, harmonise training and materials, and jointly evaluate what is happening on the ground — as in Punjab and Himachal Pradesh, where WCD and Education departments now provide identical training, curricula and materials to anganwadi and government pre-primary teachers alike.

### 8.2 Where three- and four-year-olds belong

Offering a personal view, I argued that three- and four-year-olds should generally remain in anganwadis rather than move into formal school settings, for two related reasons: anganwadi language and staffing tend to sit closer to the immediate home language and community than a larger school, and anganwadis close to home sustain a higher degree of parent–teacher interaction, particularly with mothers. I suggested comprehensively strengthening anganwadis — nutrition, immunisation and early childhood education together — for this age group, while treating the balvatika year immediately before Grade I as the point of transition to a school setting, revisited annually as states move toward universal, quality pre-primary provision.

On the related question of collocating anganwadis with primary schools — a practice NEP recommends — the answer is highly context-dependent. In large, multi-storey Delhi government schools running from Grade VI upward, I have cautioned against collocation, warning that small children could become physically and institutionally ‘lost’ within such large campuses, and that anganwadis risk being treated as a lower-resourced, second-class presence within a school. Five-year-olds can generally adapt to an organised school environment, but three- and four-year-olds benefit from staying close to home. I generally prefer identifying schools and anganwadis that have already worked out good local arrangements themselves, and learning from those, over issuing a single top-down rule.

On language, children should first become comfortable in the language they know at home as they move into Grade I, and only then build comfort with the language of instruction and, eventually, English — pursuing both half-heartedly at once achieves neither. Familiarity with English through rhymes or informal exposure can coexist with this sequencing without displacing it.

### 8.3 Teachers, technology and the middle tier

Responding to a question on whether learning outcomes depend more on individual teacher motivation than on technology or method, leaving teachers to decide independently what to prioritise rarely works at scale; system-wide alignment — a decision, taken at district or state level, that a specific period each day is reserved for catch-up teaching, backed by appropriate training — makes it far easier for individual teachers to follow through. Middle-tier functionaries, such as mandal-level officers in Andhra Pradesh or cluster coordinators elsewhere, are the critical link that makes such alignment work in practice, provided they too are supported rather than left to drive change alone. Uttar Pradesh's sustained, narrowly focused push on Grades I–III under NIPUN Bharat between 2022 and 2024 is an example of what a state can achieve by committing to a small number of clear priorities, in contrast to the confusion that can result when several competing programmes run at once.

### 8.4 Children with special needs

Asked about the neglect of children with special needs, field data from a Pratham project across 25 villages in Hoshangabad district, Madhya Pradesh, showed that roughly 120 of about 1,200 assessed children were identified as having some special need, of whom 25 to 30 had severe needs preventing regular school attendance altogether. The remaining, milder cases could generally be accommodated in the classroom through common-sense teacher orientation and a degree of extra attention; the severe cases required specialist matching that proved difficult to arrange, given how scattered and varied each type of severe disability tends to be.

Mission Buniyaad, a Delhi government catch-up initiative for Grades VI–IX, offers a further reference point: one school with 900 enrolled children reduced the number struggling with basic reading from about 600 to roughly 60–70 within a few months, through dedicated classes led by its best teachers — but even the school's special educators were typically trained in only one type of disability, pointing to a need for broader reform of special-educator training itself. Premature cognitive labelling of children who fail to progress should be avoided: teachers can often point to an underlying illness, family disruption or social issue rather than a cognitive disability as the real cause, arguing for district-level mapping of the incidence of different issues to guide resource planning, rather than treating every case of non-progress as a single category of disability.

### 8.5 Multi-grade multi-level teaching and the supervisor's role

On the challenge of multi-grade, multi-level (MGML) teaching — raised with reference to Odisha's *shishu-vatikas*, where a single teacher may face several *balvatika* and primary grades combined — the difficulty of managing wide age-and-level spreads with limited training is real. The central lever is not the frontline teacher's qualification alone, but whether her supervisor has been equipped to visit, demonstrate and hand-hold on-site, rather than relying solely on classroom-style training. In Pratham's own TaRL work, mentors and coordinators are required to practise the method themselves for roughly a month before training teachers, so that they can support implementation on the ground rather than only in theory; initial resistance to this is sometimes seen among supervisors, but direct interaction with children tends to build enthusiasm once they begin.

On why the supply of qualified pre-school teachers remains low despite policy requirements, some states, including Uttar Pradesh, have been forced to relax pre-school-teacher qualification requirements during recruitment because too few qualified candidates were available — a supply–demand loop that formal qualification requirements alone cannot resolve. Pratham's own experience suggests anganwadi workers and community mothers can be trained to teach this age group well, and that the emphasis should fall on sustained practical support rather than on qualifications as a gatekeeping requirement.

## 8.6 Assessing the youngest learners

Asked whether an ASER-like assessment should be extended to pre-school-age children, the answer is explicitly against a simplified, literacy-focused tool for children aged three to six — the ASER tool is deliberately built for older children and would misrepresent what matters at this stage. A ‘continuum tool’ spanning five developmental domains — including cognitive, social-emotional and physical activities — is already in use in Himachal Pradesh, Punjab and Maharashtra, paired with visual report cards that help parents and teachers see early childhood development as a breadth of skills rather than only letters and numbers. Assessment for this age group should be activity-based, conducted once or twice a year at most so as not to burden children, and in some states integrated into events where parents participate alongside their children, as in some of Maharashtra's practice.

## 8.7 Closing the loop between data and classroom practice

A participant raised the broader concern that annual assessment data such as ASER often fails to translate into classroom practice, citing transmission and ‘trickle-down’ losses within state assessment systems. The feedback loop between assessment, training and classroom incorporation does need to be tighter, but there is growing openness among districts and states to use assessment evidence for planning — as in early-childhood policy discussions in Himachal Pradesh and Punjab that drew on assessment data well before NEP 2020. Decentralised, district-level action often moves this loop faster than centralised processes, particularly where a motivated official is willing to act locally.

## 9. An Agenda for CRISP

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- Read state pre-primary enrolment patterns before recommending a provisioning strategy — Bihar, Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh each reached similar goals through different starting points and different institutional mixes.
- Support the operational separation of catch-up teaching from regular grade-level curriculum delivery, on the TaRL model: a defined daily period, existing teachers regrouped by assessed level, and groupings reassessed at intervals.
- Prioritise Grades III–VIII for catch-up attention in current CRISP education work, given the comparatively slower recovery in Grades III–V and the decade-long stagnation evident in Grades VI–VIII.

- Where CRISP supports state or district implementation, invest in the middle tier — mandal officers, cluster coordinators and supervisors — as the layer through which system-wide alignment is actually delivered to classrooms.
- For early-childhood assessment, favour continuum-style, multi-domain tools over literacy-only instruments, and keep assessment frequency low and activity-based to avoid burdening young children.
- Support district-level initiative on foundational learning even where state-level participation is partial or delayed, consistent with the pattern in which decentralised action closes the assessment-to-practice loop faster than centralised processes.

## Conclusion: Foundational Skills as the Gateway to All Learning

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India's foundational learning challenge sits within a global one: a widespread assumption that opening schools would be sufficient for children to learn has proven false, and enrolment without learning is now a persistent problem across many countries. In India, near-universal enrolment (97%) coexists with roughly half of Grade V children unable to read a Grade II-level paragraph.

A video clip from 2017 concluded the session. In it, the co-founder of Pratham, Dr Madhav Chavan, observes that most human knowledge is eventually encoded in words and numbers, so a lack of foundational skills closes off access to everything built on top of them; within an ordinary classroom, children with prior preschool exposure and educated parents tend to cluster at what he calls ‘the front of the class,’ drawing a disproportionate share of teacher attention, while children without such exposure fall further behind at the back.

Teaching at the Right Level, in this framing, is Pratham's answer: an assessment-led, level-based regrouping method under which most children learn to read within 50 days, validated over fifteen years of collaboration with J-PAL-affiliated researchers, including a randomised evaluation in Uttar Pradesh in which children attending a TaRL learning camp doubled their rate of paragraph-reading relative to non-attendees. As of the video, the approach had reached 8 million children in India and had been adopted internationally, including across 1,100 schools in Zambia, with plans to expand further.

*“Kids are not resistant to learning. It's just the way you package it. I think we are giving back children their childhood. It's about my self-esteem, that I'm somebody, and then I'm going to grow.”*

## About the Speaker

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Dr Rukmini Banerji is Senior Adviser to the Pratham Education Foundation, one of India's largest education-focused non-governmental organisations, with which she has been associated since 1996. She previously served as Pratham's Chief Executive Officer and, from 2005 to 2014, as Director of the ASER Centre, where she led the Annual Status of Education Report, India's largest citizen-led household survey of children's schooling and learning, which continues to inform education policy discourse in India and internationally.

Over her tenure at Pratham, she played a central role in designing and implementing the organisation's large-scale learning partnerships with state governments across the country. She trained as an economist, with undergraduate study at St Stephen's College, University of Delhi, graduate study at the Delhi School of Economics, a Rhodes Scholarship at the University of Oxford, and doctoral studies at the University of Chicago. She was awarded the Yidan Prize for Education Development in 2021 and was the inaugural recipient of the Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Shiksha Puraskar, conferred by the Government of Bihar.

## **Source and Publication Note**

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The text has been substantively edited for clarity, coherence and publication, and rendered in the first person with the speaker's authorisation. Proper names, place names and programme titles have been normalised where the intended reference was clear; uncertain or incidental oral material (technical checks, cross-talk, connectivity interruptions) has been omitted. No external claims have been added.

Figures and tables were prepared by CRISP from the content of the lecture and the speaker's accompanying presentation slides.