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**SCHOOL OF
PUBLIC POLICY**

Issue

Brief

Series



Bihar's Elementary Education Crisis: A Call for Action

Issue Brief Number: IB-2025-02

Submitted by: Saumya Anand (MPP Cohort: 2023-25)

Under the Guidance of: Dr. Amrendra Pandey and Dr. Arvind Mayaram (Instructors at Kautilya

School of Public Policy)

Cite this Article as *Anand, S. (2025). Bihar's Elementary Education Crisis: A Call for Action. Kautilya School of Public Policy [online]. Available at: <https://kspp.edu.in/issue-brief/bihar's-elementary-education-crisis-a-call-for-action>*

Problem Statement- Bihar's Elementary Education Crisis: A Call for Action

Elementary education serves as the foundation of a child's academic journey, shaping their abilities in reading, writing, sports, arts, and creativity. It also fosters essential traits such as communication, innovation, and social management, which play a critical role in a child's overall development. Despite its significance, the elementary education system in Bihar faces numerous challenges that hinder the state's goal of "Education for All."

While Bihar has made commendable efforts in expanding access to education through infrastructure development, mid-day meals, and increased enrollment, critical issues such as poor attendance, inadequate teaching quality, and subpar learning outcomes remain unresolved. According to the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2022, student attendance in Bihar is below 60% at both primary and upper primary levels, compared to the national average of approximately 72%. On the other hand, government school enrollment has increased by 4% between 2018 and 2022. However, learning outcomes remain stagnant, showing only a 2% improvement over the past four years.

The ASER (2022) report emphasizes the urgent need for reforms in teaching practices and classroom activities to achieve universal basic literacy and numeracy by Grade III by 2025. These persistent challenges not only impede Bihar's development but also pose significant obstacles to India's broader educational aspirations. This paper examines the root causes of Bihar's elementary education crisis, evaluates existing policies, and suggests actionable solutions to address these pressing issues effectively.

Relevance:

Elementary education is the cornerstone of a child's formal learning process, laying the groundwork for their academic and personal growth. Beyond academic knowledge, it instills moral values such as respect, empathy, and integrity, which are integral to holistic development. In India, elementary education is not merely a fundamental right but also a constitutional mandate under Article 21-A, introduced by the 86th Constitutional Amendment Act, 2002. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009 reinforces this mandate, ensuring every child aged 6-14 has access to free and compulsory schooling. "The Right to Education Act 2009, also known as the RTE Act 2009, was enacted by the Parliament of India on 4 August 2009. It describes modalities of the importance of free and compulsory education for children aged between 6-14 years in India under Article 21 (A) of the Constitution of India" (Sharma,2021).

According to census 2011, Bihar accounts for approximately 9% of India's total population. "The population growth rate of Bihar for 2024 is projected at 1.44%, the highest among states, it will add 1.84 million more people in 2024" (Statistics Times, 2024). Despite this demographic significance, the state has struggled to harness its potential due to systemic failures in providing quality elementary education. It would be pertinent to state that enhancing elementary education in Bihar is not just a state-level priority but a national imperative. Without marked improvements in Bihar, India's broader educational and developmental goals remain unattainable.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework:

In order to understand and assess the primary education system of Bihar, I will incorporate a comparative case study approach. My approach focuses on a comparative evaluation of the existing education outcomes and education policies of Bihar with those of Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Kerala. The state of elementary education in Uttar Pradesh has been showing gradual improvements in the various indicators, so it will also be a case of incremental progress. Kerala, the first state in India to be recognized as a completely literate state with a literacy rate of 96.2%, is a case standard framework for the country as a whole. Therefore, I have selected these states to make a comparative analysis on both similarities and disparities on parameters like demography, economic growth, role of government and private players. The analysis will focus on several key indicators, some of which are:

- **Enrollment and Retention Rate:** Analyzing how policy measures in each of these states has affected students' enrolment and attendance in primary schools.
- **Drop-out Rate:** Explains the shortcomings of the system and overall socio-economic situation, which leads to students leaving schools.
- **Teacher Quality and Availability:** Evaluating the prospects of qualified teachers and the efficiency of training them.
- **Infrastructure (Toilet, Library, Electricity, Computer, Learning material):** To an extent, comparing the sufficiency of school infrastructure such as classroom standards, sanitation facilities, and learning materials.
- **Sports Facilities:** Plays a crucial role in the holistic development of a child.
- **Mid-day meal Scheme:** Plays a significant role in attracting children to schools
- **Attendance Rate:** Shows the quality of school and teachers to retain students

- Health and Nutrition: Assessing to what extent states have successfully enacted their educational policies and the results of their attainment.

Rationale:

Use of comparative analysis can be attributed to the need to understand the nature of the perennial problems that the state of Bihar is facing, as well as try to emulate the success of other states. In this case, it would be prudent to look at how things have been done at the state level especially in Uttar Pradesh and Kerala, in order to understand the measures that have been put in place to ensure improved performances. For instance, Uttar Pradesh can be taken as a suitable point of reference as it has been experiencing relatively slow but constant positive changes in its education outcomes in the recent past. As such, an analysis of how Uttar Pradesh has managed to overcome its resource constraints and policy issues can provide insights for Bihar. Kerala on the other hand is considered as the epitome of education system in India with a literacy rate of 96%. Through its qualitative community participation, effective teacher training and monitoring, the success story of Kerala has exemplified the rays of hope that Bihar needs to emulate.

Analysis and Discussion:

The fundamental crisis in elementary education in Bihar can be observed through low attendance rates, high dropout rate, least learning outcomes and so on, hence making it difficult to attain the goal of universal elementary education. I have made various comparisons of Bihar on different metrics with Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Kerala and tried to provide an understanding on how this problem should be dealt with.

Metrics	Bihar	Uttar Pradesh	Kerala
Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) %	96.2	98.1	103.3
School-Dropout Rate	4.6	0.8	0.8
Teacher to Pupil Ratio	47:1	28:1	19:1
Retention Rate%	79.6	88.1	97.7
% Schools with drinking water	98.2	98.4	100
% Schools with electricity	89.3	98.3	99.8
% Trained teacher	94.9	90.3	98.5
% Schools with playground	76.96	75.76	100
% Schools with libraries	63.3	83.7	96.6
% Schools with computers	28.5	48.2	92.3
% Schools with toilet	98.7	98.8	100
Access to learning material	291 books/school	379 books/school	2,580 books/school

% Schools implementing Mid-Day Meal scheme	95	90	100
% Schools conducting health checkups	40	50	90
% Schools with sports facilities	15	20	75
Attendance Rate%	75	78	95

Source: UDISE Report 2021-22

- Gross Enrollment and Retention Rate

The discrepancy between enrollment and retention rate in Bihar highlights a very fundamental problem. This means that children are being enrolled but not being retained in the schools. This could be as a result of various factors: low quality education or lack of appropriate facilities, in-consistency in policies, low community engagement and poor socio-economic situation which hinders the children from pursuing their academic journey. The quality and standard of schools in Bihar is a major cause of concern. The state government in these years has worked on quantity i.e. increasing the number of schools but not on the quality. “A survey report on 81 randomly selected primary and upper primary schools (middle schools) in north Bihar says government

schools are in danger of being “replaced by cheap and dingy tuition centers” and “urgent action is required to address this crisis” (Tewary, 2023).

Kerala, where enrolment and retention rates are almost 100 percent, demonstrates that ongoing policies, social engagement, and a focus on teacher competence are the major determinants of effective student retention. “Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen has written extensively on the Kerala Model of education and attributes Kerala’s economic and social success to the consistency with which school education expanded, based on sustained public policies and action” (Sharma, 2021). The quality enhancement programs like “Promoting Regional Schools to International Standards” have helped the state to achieve international standards in school education. “The successful implementation of PRISM (Promoting Regional Schools to International Standards through Multiple Interventions) and whopping allocations to develop one school in each assembly segment to international standards is what can be seen as the reason behind the tectonic shift of 2.35 lakh students from private to public schools” (Sharma, 2021).

- Infrastructure Deficiencies

The lack of basic infrastructure like classrooms, electricity, drinking water, toilet facilities ultimately leads to high dropout rates and low retention rates in schools. A survey by Jan Jagran Shakti Sangathan (JJSS) titled “Where are the Kids”, guided by noted economist Jean Dreze, shows “missing buildings, shortage of classrooms, and no toilets in 81 primary and upper primary schools” (*Where Are the Kids – Education Emergency*, 2023). Kerala has set a good example in investing in school infrastructure and facilities including digital learning models of education for Bihar to emulate. Uttar Pradesh has made significant progress in infrastructure in recent past years. “The Uttar Pradesh’s government’s initiative to build extra lavatories for girls

and develop other infrastructure in elementary schools has led to a massive jump in students' enrolment and attendance, as per a state government report" (Education Today, 2022).

- Teacher's Quality and Availability

The Pupil Teacher Ratio of Bihar is 47:1, which is relatively poor as compared to 19:1 in Kerala and 28:1 in UP. This implies that teachers are overwhelmed with excessive responsibilities and hence offer inadequate individualized attention to students. The success of Kerala in elementary education can also be attributed to the implementation of a teacher training program which is as high as 98%. The recent teacher training program in UP can be adopted for improving teacher's quality through a collaborative approach of government and civil society. "The Uttar Pradesh government has initiated a training program for teachers and Shiksha Mitras across the state, principals and teachers who have achieved up to 80% of the 'Nipun' target in their schools will have the opportunity to share their successful experiences" (Financial Express, 2023). Poor quality of teachers in Bihar can also be associated with over burdening of teaching staff with non-teaching duties which ultimately results in reducing their efficiency. "The Bihar government has mobilized tens of thousands of government school teachers to resume the caste survey" (Mazumdar, 2023). "Teachers of government schools in two districts of Bihar have been asked to make rounds of their respective wards and panchayat committee areas to stop people from defecating in the open" (Correspondent, 2017).

- Mid-day Meal Scheme (MDMS) and Health & Nutrition Services

Facing the aftermath of hunger and poverty, the Midday-meal scheme became one of the major push factors for children to go to schools. "MDMS was initiated in 1995 with the aim of

universalization of primary education by increasing enrollment, reducing drop-out rates, and increasing attendance and simultaneously impacting on nutrition of students in primary classes” (Kaur, 2021). While the prompt implementation of the Midday meal scheme has significantly attracted the children to schools, the lack of holistic health and nutrition support has affected their overall productivity. The step towards preventive health through the “School Health Program” in Kerala can be adopted for holistic development of children. “The main objective of the program is to identify incipient diseases, disorders and disability by adequate and timely action and to become the anchor of promotive and preventive health” (National Health Mission, 2020)

- Libraries and sports facilities

Libraries and the availability of sports facilities in schools equally contribute immensely to the overall developmental process of students. These facilities are not only beneficial for the academic but also overall improvement of a person’s health, interpersonal skills as well as personality. The differences observed in both library and sports facilities among Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Kerala shows that targeted interventions are required in Bihar. These basic needs, if invested, will help the state greatly to improve students’ academic achievements as well as physique. Building on Kerala's positive experience where libraries and sports facilities were integrated, Bihar too can follow the path and create a better learning environment. It will also enhance the development of students and prime them for future responsibilities and possibilities.

Therefore, to enhance the education system in Bihar, the state can learn from both Kerala as well as Uttar Pradesh. Kerala has a unique system of community participation, where members of the community get an opportunity to participate in school management, leading to

increased focus on organizational ownership and implications in student's achievement. Bihar can also achieve this by involving local committees which are involved in the decision-making processes. Further, Kerala's investment in the teacher training program could be an example to what Bihar should emulate. Another lesson is provided by Uttar Pradesh's success in the implementation of the Graded Learning Program (GLP). "Teachers grouped children across grade 1-5 according to their current reading and mathematics levels, and used appropriate activities and materials for each group, for two hours during the school day, strengthening foundational skills" (Mukerji, 2019). This program offers differentiated teaching, considers the learner's abilities in reading and mathematics; and sets up learning groups. Thus, Bihar can adopt similar strategies to address learning gaps in its own classroom settings. Following the above-discussed strategies based on Kerala and Uttar Pradesh models, Bihar can aim at making the education system integrated for all students.

Education in Kerala is a successful example of how socio-political will for, and steady policy enforcement can decisively impact the future. Based on the historical background of Rani Gouri Parvati Bai's royal letter, the political heads of the state of Kerala have always emphasized education as the basic right to be given to the citizens of Kerala. "The historic royal rescript of 1817 proclaimed education as the responsibility of the state. Simultaneously, it emphasized that "political will" is more important than the political economy to decide the expenditure on education" (Sharma, 2021). This commitment has been revealed through the continued investment in education by the state over the years even when faced with some financial constraints. This political commitment and community participation, along with persistent investments made in education, make it possible to conclude that Kerala obtains very high educational results.

Bihar's Structural Barriers to Replicating Successful Models from Other States

Bihar's challenges in implementing educational reforms highlight the importance of understanding local socio-economic and political contexts. While states like Kerala highly succeeded in educational reform through community participation, Bihar's experiment to decentralize this process, exposed its structural vulnerabilities such as elite capture, corruption, and governance failure.

The attempt to engage local governance bodies—panchayats and municipal entities—in teacher recruitment in Bihar failed to yield the desired outcomes. In the year 2006, Nitish Kumar's government launched the teacher recruitment drive to address the pressing issue of vacancies and student enrolment. At the outset, the plan was ambitious: recruit 150,000 teachers through local bodies, provide jobs, and increase school attendance. However, as the drive progressed, it became evident that the decentralization of recruitment opened doors to widespread corruption and nepotism. The recruitment was marred by fake degrees, unverified qualifications, and arbitrary selections, undermining both the education system and public trust. "The scheme was flawed from the very beginning, the state government cannot trust these people to implement even its minutest developmental scheme, yet it decided to delegate such an important task to them" (Mishra, 2014).

The contradictory experiences of community driven educational reform Kerala and Bihar highlight the importance of local context in implementing such policies. Kerala's success can be attributed to high literacy rate, social capital, equitable resource allocation, and effective

governance systems, fostering a shared commitment to quality education among all the stakeholders. At the same time, Bihar faced several socio-economic and political issues that hindered its capacity enhancement efforts. Power in Bihar's panchayats is often concentrated in the hands of local elites, leading to recruitment based on nepotism and bribes rather than merit (elite capture). Absence of a strong governance and accountability mechanism exacerbated the issue and many teachers were hired through fake degree certificates and fraud. A high unemployment level in the state made people desperate in job seeking, making them willing to pay bribes, while the state employed officials exploited the situation for personal benefits. Additionally, Bihar did not have the institutional strength to manage a large-scale recruitment process effectively, unlike Kerala, where local bodies were better trained and equipped. Weak oversight by the education department worsened the situation, as political compulsions—given the teachers' role in election processes—deterred the government from taking decisive action. The recruitment of unqualified teachers severely affected educational outcomes, with reports revealing poor literacy and numeracy levels among students and alarming teaching errors. Although the policy helped to boost the enrollment rate initially, it reduced education quality in the long run.

Way Forward:

To address Bihar's elementary education crisis, the state must adopt a tailored approach, focusing on structural reforms that consider its unique socio-political challenges. Apart from Kerala and Uttar Pradesh, states like Tamil Nadu and Himachal Pradesh offer exemplary practices that Bihar can learn from. Tamil Nadu's focus on early childhood education and continuous learning assessments has significantly improved foundational learning. The state's Activity-Based Learning (ABL) approach encourages child-centric education through interactive methods,

fostering better student engagement. “ABL is an approach to pedagogical practice in the early elementary grades that has replaced teacher and textbook-centred instruction with students’ independent pursuit of active and child-friendly learning activities” (Niesz et al., 2011). Adopting such an approach in Bihar could shift the focus from rote learning to more meaningful educational experiences, enhancing learning outcomes.

Himachal Pradesh offers valuable insights through its emphasis on teacher attendance and monitoring systems. The state implemented biometric attendance for teachers, ensuring accountability and reducing absenteeism, which in turn improved classroom engagement and student performance. “Rajesh Sharma, Director of Samagra Shiksha, highlighted the importance of this initiative during a meeting with Education Department officials on Monday, ensure real-time attendance of teachers and students on the Smart Attendance App in all schools across the state, Sharma directed during the meeting” (Bhandari, 2024). Bihar, struggling with irregular teacher attendance, can replicate such monitoring systems to ensure the presence of qualified teachers in classrooms. Likewise, the Shala Darpan portal launched in Rajasthan helps in school management, student performance, teacher attendance, as well as learning achievements in time-bound manners. Bihar could increase the transparency and evidence-based policy making by adopting a similar platform. Madhya Pradesh’s success with public-private partnerships also presents a viable option. Programs like *LEP (Learning Enhancement Program)* have been launched in collaboration with NGOs, focusing on remedial education to improve literacy and numeracy among struggling students. Such a model of partnership between the government and civil society can prove beneficial for Bihar in addressing learning deficits better. Further, the state attempts to attract and produce female teachers for rural schools to boost school attendance

rate especially among female students. Thus, Bihar, experiencing similar gender gaps, could definitely leverage the strategies of targeted recruitment and empowerment of female educators.

Incorporating these reforms will require Bihar to strengthen local governance, prevent elite capture, and address corruption through strict accountability measures. Investing in school infrastructure—such as classrooms, toilets, libraries, and sports facilities—combined with innovative programs in teacher training and digital education, will pave the way for sustainable improvements. By adopting these reforms and integrating successful practices from other states with a tailored approach, Bihar can transform its elementary education system, laying the foundation for sustainable development and contributing meaningfully to India's educational aspirations.

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