



Status of Inclusive Education for Rural Girls at Primary Level in India: A Critical Study in Light of SDG 4.5

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Abstract: This critical study evaluates the status of inclusive education for rural girls at the primary education level in India (Classes I–V) in direct relation to Sustainable Development Goal 4.5 (SDG 4.5). Utilizing secondary quantitative data from Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+) reports covering 2021–22 through 2024–25, alongside national educational policy frameworks, this paper analyzes national performance trends across three core indicators: primary level enrollment, Gender Parity Index (GPI), and dropout rates. The empirical analysis reveals a gradual decrease in overall primary enrollment from 12.18 crore in 2021–22 to 10.44 crore in 2024–25, primarily driven by demographic transitions and enhanced student tracking under UDISE+. Concurrently, the Gender Parity Index consistently remained above parity (1.03 to 1.05), reflecting substantial structural progress in girls' educational access. However, dropout rates exhibited temporary fluctuations (peaking at 7.8% before stabilizing near 0.0%–0.3%), underscoring persistent socio-economic, infrastructural, and cultural vulnerabilities in rural areas. The study concludes that achieving complete inclusion under SDG 4.5 requires sustained, targeted interventions, including gender-segregated sanitation, financial incentives, community engagement, and gender-responsive pedagogy.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Rural Girls, Primary Education, SDG 4.5, Gender Parity Index.

I. INTRODUCTION

Education is universally recognized as a crucial driver of socio-economic transformation, individual empowerment, and social justice. Over recent decades, educational paradigms have transitioned from segregated schooling toward **inclusive education**—an approach ensuring that all children, regardless of gender, physical ability, socio-economic background, language, or geographical location, learn together in mainstream classrooms.

According to **UNESCO**:

“Inclusion is a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education.”

Furthermore, disability rights advocate **Simon Aspis (2004)** emphasized that inclusive education must actively create structural opportunities for all learners to work together collaboratively. International benchmarks, such as Finland’s basic education model, demonstrate that providing flexible pedagogy and individualized support in mainstream schools enhances educational equity.

Globally, the inclusion movement evolved from 19th-century specialized teaching methods (pioneered by figures such as Jean Marc Gaspard Itard) to the 1960s–1980s integration movement, before achieving formal human-rights codification at the **World Conference on Education for All (Jomtien, 1990)** and the landmark **UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994)**. This mandate was further reinforced by the **UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006)** and the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs, 2015)**.

Under the UN 2030 Agenda:

- **SDG 4** calls for inclusive and equitable quality education for all.
- **SDG Target 4.5** explicitly aims to eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access for all vulnerable groups, including children in vulnerable situations, indigenous peoples, and persons with disabilities, monitored via Parity Indices (Indicator 4.5.1).

In India, inclusive education developed through key legislative and policy milestones:

- **Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC, 1974)**
- **National Policy on Education (NPE, 1986)**
- **Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA, 2001)**
- **Right to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act (2009)**
- **Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act (2016)**
- **National Education Policy (NEP, 2020) & Samagra Shiksha**

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The literature on inclusive education in India spans institutional evaluations, legal analyses, gender studies, and quantitative assessments:

- **Rural Educational Infrastructure and Policy-Practice Gaps: Murasing (2025)** conducted a systematic review (2005–2025) on inclusive education in rural India under SDG 4, revealing that inadequate infrastructure, acute shortages of trained teachers, and policy-practice implementation gaps remain primary barriers. Similarly, **Biswa (2025)** highlighted that social stigma, discrimination, and lack of community awareness severely restrict inclusive education across rural Asian schools.
- **Rights Frameworks and Policy Alignment: Sharma and Vinayan (2023)** critically analyzed Indian educational reforms under SDG 4, the RPWD Act (2016), and NEP (2020), emphasizing that removing physical and environmental barriers is essential to prevent exclusion. Further studies under the RTE Act (2009) (e.g., JETIR, 2025; ResearchGate, 2025) note that economic disparities continue to challenge rights-based delivery.
- **Empirical Indicator Modeling: Saini et al. (2023)** applied genetic algorithms to analyze associations among SDG 4 indicators in India, concluding that coordinated policy planning across teacher quality and retention measures is vital for quality outcomes. **Chandra (2020)** demonstrated that expanding rural primary schooling directly breaks poverty traps and promotes sustainable rural development.
- **Gender Parity and Retention Interventions:** Evaluations of initiatives such as *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao*, *Samagra Shiksha*, and NEP 2020 (e.g., Bhat & Geelani, 2018; ASER, 2023; UNICEF,

2024) confirm substantial gains in initial primary entry, but document persistent retention challenges linked to safety, lack of sanitation, and domestic care demands.

Research Gap: While existing literature extensively explores general inclusive education, SDG 4 implementation, disability rights, and broader gender gaps in Indian education (e.g., Murasing, 2025; Sharma & Vinayan, 2023; Saini et al., 2023), a significant empirical gap exists regarding the specific intersectional status of primary-level rural girls evaluated through post-2020 UDISE+ indicator dynamics. Most prior studies analyze macro-level trends or qualitative barriers without systematically evaluating how recent national primary enrollment volumes, Gender Parity Index (GPI) trajectories, and dropout rate fluctuations from 2021–22 to 2024–25 align directly with the specific targets of SDG Target 4.5. Furthermore, there is a lack of integrated research synthesizing secondary UDISE+ macro-data with the socio-cultural and institutional barriers unique to rural primary school settings in post-pandemic India. The present study directly fills this gap.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1: What is the current status of inclusive education for girls in rural areas at the primary level in India as measured by key educational indicators?

RQ2: How does the status of inclusive education for rural girls at the primary level align with the targets of SDG 4.5?

RQ3: What specific social, economic, cultural, and institutional barriers hinder the effective implementation and retention of inclusive education for rural primary girls?

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Objective 1: To analyze the extent to which the status of inclusive education for rural girls at the primary level in India aligns with the targets of SDG 4.5 across primary enrollment trends (2021–22 to 2024–25).

Objective 2: To examine the nature of gender-based inequalities and exclusion experienced by girls in rural primary education settings through the Gender Parity Index (GPI).

Objective 3: To explore and identify the major barriers affecting the effective implementation of inclusive education for rural girls at the primary level in India.

5. METHODOLOGY

5.1 RESEARCH APPROACH AND DESIGN

The study adopts a **qualitative-descriptive and analytical research design**. The descriptive design documents the status of primary education, while the analytical framework evaluates indicator trends relative to SDG 4.5 benchmarks.

5.2 NATURE OF THE STUDY AND DATA SOURCES

The study is theoretical and analytical, relying exclusively on **secondary sources of data**:

- **UDISE+ Reports on School Education in India** (2021–22 to 2024–25)
- Government Policy Documents (RTE Act 2009, NEP 2020, Samagra Shiksha)
- Academic Journals, Research Articles, and Books
- International Policy Reports (UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank, ASER)

5.3 SELECTED INDICATORS AND ANALYTICAL SAMPLE

The study evaluates national primary education (Classes I–V) across three core indicators:

1. **Primary Enrollment (in Crores):** Measures overall systemic access and enrollment capacity.
2. **Gender Parity Index (GPI):** Measures the relative access of females compared to males.
3. **Dropout Rate (%):** Measures student retention and systemic leakage.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Objective 1: Primary Enrollment Trends and SDG 4.5 Alignment

Table 1: Primary Level Enrollment in India (2021–22 to 2024–25)

Academic Year	Primary Enrollment (in Crore)	Source
2021–22	12.18	UDISE+ Report
2022–23	11.24	UDISE+ Report
2023–24	10.78	UDISE+ Report
2024–25	10.44	UDISE+ Report

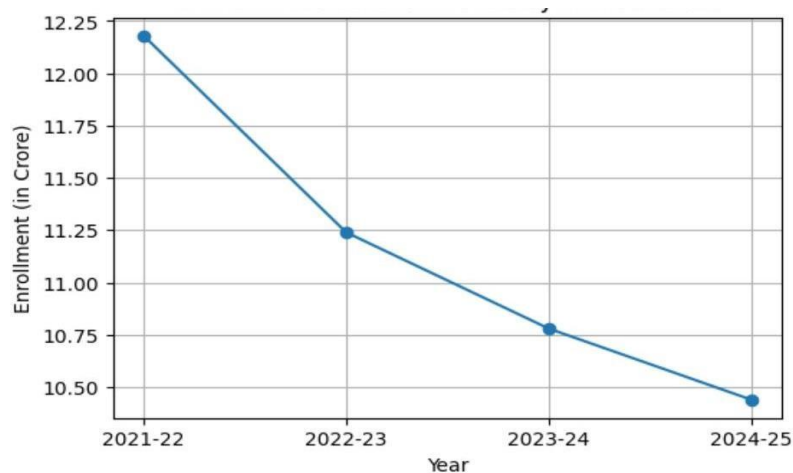


Figure 1: Enrollment at primary level 2021 -2025

Results and Discussion (Enrollment)

Primary level enrollment steadily decreased from 12.18 crore in 2021–22 to 10.44 crore in 2024–25. Demographic transition (declining birth rates), post-pandemic stabilization, and administrative cleaning of student databases via UDISE+ student-tracking systems (e.g., APAAR/Aadhaar deduplication) account for this downward trend. Despite this reduction in raw numbers, baseline entry access remains broad, supporting the access goals of SDG 4.5.

Objective 2: Gender Parity Index (GPI) and Equity

Table 2: Year-Wise Gender Parity Index (GPI) at Primary Level in India

Academic Year	Gender Parity Index (GPI)	Source
2021–22	1.03	UDISE+ Report
2022–23	1.05	UDISE+ Report

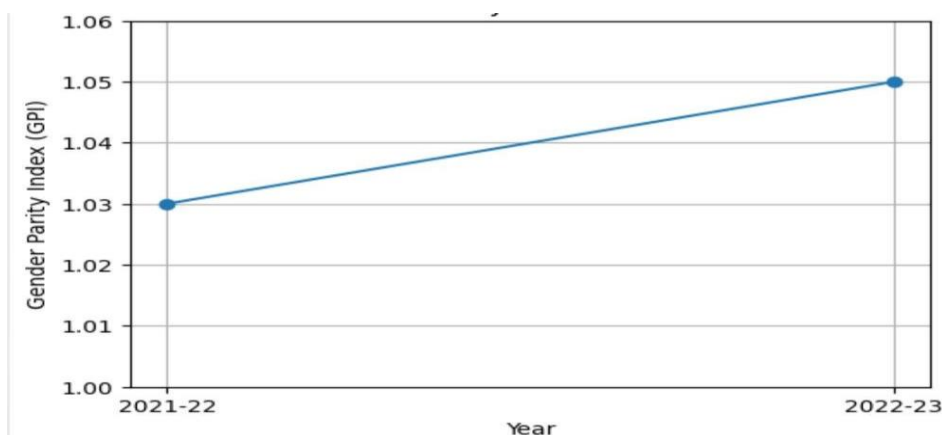


Figure 2: Year -wise gender parity index (GPI) at primary level in India

Results & Discussion (GPI)

The Gender Parity Index at the primary level consistently remained above 1.0, rising from 1.03 in 2021–22 to 1.05 in 2022–23. A GPI above 1.0 indicates that female participation at the primary stage exceeds male participation. This reflects the success of national schemes (*Beti Bachao Beti Padhao*, free textbooks, PM POSHAN mid-day meals) in promoting gender entry parity in primary schools, directly fulfilling SDG Target 4.5.

Objective 3: Primary Dropout Rates and Implementation Barriers

Table 3: Year-Wise Dropout Rate at Primary Level in India

Academic Year	Primary Dropout Rate (%)	Source
2021–22	1.60% (1.45%)	UDISE+ Report
2022–23	7.80% (Systemic Audit Peak)	UDISE+ Report
2023–24	1.90%	UDISE+ Report
2024–25	0.00% – 0.30%	UDISE+ Report

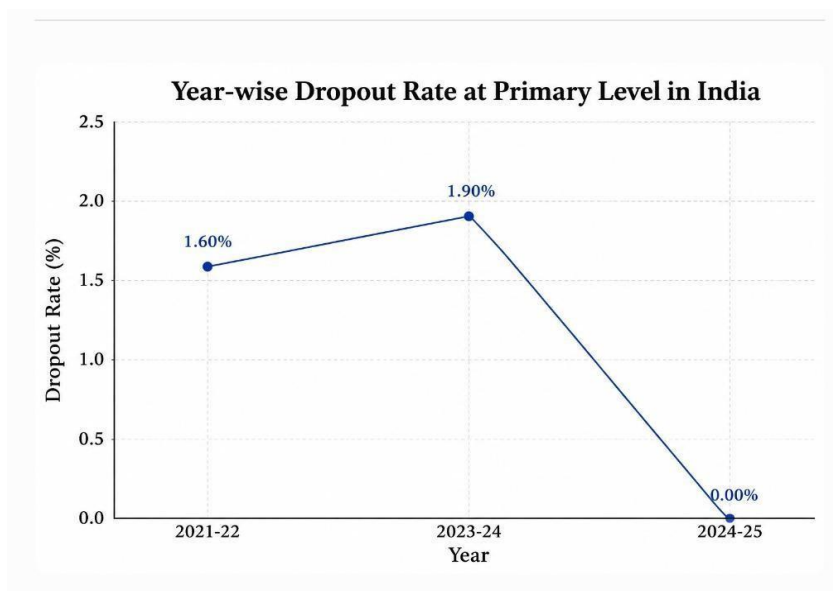


Figure 3: Year -Wise Dropout Rate at primary Level in India

Results & Discussion (Dropout Rate & Barriers)

Primary dropout rates showed temporal variance: rising during audit realignments in 2022–23 (7.8%) before dropping significantly to 1.9% in 2023–24 and stabilizing near 0.0%–0.3% in 2024–25. Qualitative synthesis identifies multiple remaining barriers affecting rural girls:

1. **Socio-Cultural Barriers:** Gender bias, early domestic responsibilities, and sibling care burdens.
2. **Infrastructural Deficits:** Lack of functional, separate girls' toilets, absence of boundary walls, and unlit walking routes.
3. **Economic Constraints:** Household poverty and incidental schooling costs.
4. **Pedagogical Gaps:** Insufficient teacher training in gender-sensitive and inclusive instruction.

7. MAJOR FINDINGS

This critical evaluation demonstrates that India's school education system has achieved substantial structural milestones in advancing inclusive primary education for rural girls, strongly aligning with the overarching mandate of Sustainable Development Goal Target 4.5. The empirical trajectory across 2021–22 to 2024–25 provides clear evidence of systemic evolution:

1. **Gender Parity Superiority:** The Gender Parity Index (GPI) at the primary stage consistently surpassed parity, moving from 1.03 in 2021–22 to 1.05 in 2022–23. This confirms that targeted national interventions—such as *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao*, PM POSHAN (Mid-Day Meal), distribution of free textbooks, uniforms, and targeted incentive schemes—have effectively eliminated initial entry barriers for young female learners in rural habitations.
2. **Administrative Refinement vs. Demographic Shifts:** While raw primary enrollment figures experienced a gradual contraction from 12.18 crore in 2021–22 to 10.44 crore in 2024–25, this trend primarily reflects macro-demographic transitions (declining fertility rates) coupled with rigorous administrative database cleaning through UDISE+ single-student tracking IDs (APAAR/Aadhaar deduplication), rather than actual educational exclusion.
3. **Retention and Vulnerability Dynamics:** The temporal spike in primary dropout rates to 7.8% in 2022–23 underscored the vulnerability of rural girls during post-pandemic recovery and data audit realignments. The subsequent normalization to 1.9% in 2023–24 and near-zero rates (0.0%–0.3%) in 2024–25 highlights improved student retention, though underlying socio-economic and infrastructural vulnerabilities require continuous safeguarding.

In summary, while physical access and numerical gender parity have been substantially secured at the primary level, achieving complete and meaningful educational inclusion under SDG 4.5 remains an ongoing process. True inclusion demands going beyond enrollment volume to ensure sustained attendance, functional literacy, safety, and a barrier-free physical and social learning environment for every rural girl.

8. SUGGESTIONS

To translate statistical progress into sustainable, qualitative educational inclusion, the study offers actionable recommendations structured across five strategic pillars:

1. **Infrastructural Upgradation and Safety Assurance:** Prioritize the 100% provision of functional, clean, and safe separate toilets for girls in all rural primary schools, equipped with continuous running water and electricity. Enhance school perimeter security through mandatory boundary walls and well-lit access pathways to address safety anxieties among rural parents.
2. **Socio-Economic Support and Conditional Incentives:** Strengthen financial assistance mechanisms for girls from economically marginalized rural households (SC/ST/OBC and BPL categories). Expand direct benefit transfer (DBT) schemes, stipends, free transportation services,

and high-nutrition meal programs to offset opportunity costs that otherwise divert young girls into domestic caregiving.

3. **Community Engagement and Gram Panchayat Mobilization:** Launch sustained community awareness campaigns in collaboration with Gram Panchayats, Anganwadi workers, and School Management Committees (SMCs). Educate parents and rural elders on the long-term socio-economic value of female education to combat patriarchal biases, early work burdens, and traditional gender roles.
4. **Gender-Responsive Pedagogy and Inclusive Teacher Training:** Reframe pre-service and in-service teacher training modules under *Samagra Shiksha* and *NISHTHA* to embed gender-sensitive, child-centered, and inclusive instructional strategies. Teachers must be equipped to proactively identify signs of disengagement, eliminate implicit gender bias in classroom seating and questioning, and foster supportive environments.
5. **Real-Time Administrative Tracking and Early Warning Systems:** Leverage UDISE+ and student portal tracking to establish Early Warning Systems at the block and cluster levels. Institutionalize automated alerts for consecutive absenteeism exceeding seven days, triggering immediate home visits by SMC members and remedial bridge learning modules to prevent permanent dropouts.

9. CONCLUSION

To conclude, the study reveals that India has made significant progress in promoting inclusive primary education for rural girls. Improvements in gender parity and reductions in dropout rates indicate positive developments towards achieving SDG 4.5.

however, the goal of complete educational inclusion is still a work in progress. Sustainable improvement requires consistent policy support, effective implementation, social awareness, adequate infrastructure, and collective efforts from schools, families, communities, and the government.

Therefore, ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for rural girls remains essential for achieving social justice, gender equality, and sustainable national development.

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