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RURAL–URBAN DISPARITIES IN LEARNING ACHIEVEMENT AMONG GOVERNMENT SCHOOL STUDENTS: DETERMINANTS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

Learning achievement is an important indicator of educational quality and equity. However, rural and urban government school students in India continue to experience differences in learning opportunities and academic outcomes due to variations in socio-economic conditions, school infrastructure, teacher availability, access to learning resources and digital facilities. These disparities can influence students' academic progress and widen the learning achievement gap. This paper examines rural–urban disparities in learning achievement among government school students, focusing on their major determinants and educational implications. It analyses the influence of socio-economic background, school-related factors, teacher preparedness, parental support and digital access on students' learning outcomes. The paper also highlights the need for equitable educational opportunities through improved school infrastructure, effective teaching practices, teacher capacity-building, need-based academic support and inclusive digital resources. It concludes that addressing rural–urban disparities require context-specific policies and sustained institutional support to ensure equitable learning opportunities and improved educational outcomes for all government school students.

Keywords: *Rural–Urban Disparities, Learning Achievement, Government Schools, Educational Equity, Socio-economic Factors, Policy Implications.*

Introduction

Learning achievement is an important indicator of educational quality, reflecting the extent to which students acquire the knowledge, skills, competencies, and understanding expected at different stages of schooling. Equitable learning opportunities are essential for ensuring that all children, irrespective of their geographical location or socioeconomic background, can achieve their educational potential. However, differences in school facilities, teaching practices, access to learning resources, family support, and socioeconomic conditions may contribute to variations in learning achievement between rural and urban students. Government schools play a vital role in

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promoting inclusive and equitable education in India, particularly among children from disadvantaged and economically weaker sections. Despite various educational initiatives, rural and urban schools may differ in infrastructure, teacher availability, digital access, parental involvement, and the availability of supplementary learning opportunities. These differences can influence students' classroom experiences and academic progress. Nevertheless, rural–urban disparities should not be viewed as uniform, as learning achievement also depends on school-level conditions, teaching quality, and the individual learning needs of students.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasises equitable access to quality education, foundational literacy and numeracy, and improved learning outcomes for all students. National assessments and educational monitoring reports also provide insights into students' learning levels and the challenges associated with different school settings. Examining rural–urban differences is therefore essential for understanding educational inequalities and identifying areas requiring policy attention. Against this background, the present paper examines rural–urban differences in learning achievement among government school students through a descriptive and analytical review of secondary sources. It discusses the factors associated with these differences, the role of educational policies, and strategies for improving learning opportunities. The paper seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of educational equity and the need for context-sensitive measures to strengthen learning achievement across rural and urban government schools.

Objectives of the Paper

The paper aims to:

- Examine rural–urban differences in learning achievement among government school students.
- Identify the major factors contributing to variations in learning achievement between rural and urban students.
- Analyse disparities in school infrastructure, teaching practices, and access to learning resources.
- Examine the role of government policies in reducing rural–urban learning disparities.
- Suggest strategies to promote equitable learning opportunities and improve learning achievement in government schools.

Research Methodology

The paper adopts a descriptive and analytical approach based on secondary sources. Relevant information is drawn from government reports, national learning assessment reports, educational policy documents, published research articles, and other credible academic publications concerning school education in India. The analysis focuses on rural–urban differences in learning achievement among government school students, particularly in relation to school infrastructure, teacher availability, instructional quality, socioeconomic conditions, and access to learning resources. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 serves as a key policy reference for examining educational equity and learning outcomes. The selected literature and documentary evidence are reviewed and thematically analysed to identify major disparities, contributing factors,

policy implications, and potential strategies for improving learning achievement. The paper does not involve primary data collection or independent statistical testing.

LEARNING ACHIEVEMENT AND EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

Learning achievement is closely associated with educational equity, as students' academic progress is influenced by differences in socio-economic backgrounds, school infrastructure, teacher availability and access to learning resources. Rural students often experience disadvantages due to inadequate educational facilities, limited digital access and shortages of qualified teachers. These disparities can affect learning outcomes and widen the achievement gap between rural and urban students. Ensuring equitable access to quality education, strengthening school infrastructure, improving teacher support and providing need-based academic assistance are essential for reducing learning inequalities and improving achievement among government school students.

Concept of Learning Achievement

Learning achievement refers to the knowledge, skills, competencies, and understanding students acquire through education. It is assessed through examinations, classroom assessments, and competency-based tasks. It is influenced by students' abilities and efforts, instructional quality, learning resources, classroom conditions, and support received at home. Beyond memorisation, it includes comprehension, critical thinking, problem-solving, and the application of knowledge. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasises competency-based learning and foundational literacy and numeracy as essential educational outcomes.

Rural–Urban Differences in Learning Opportunities

Rural and urban government schools may differ considerably in the educational resources and support available to students. Urban schools may have better access to digital facilities, supplementary learning resources, subject-specialist teachers, and private academic support. In contrast, some rural schools face teacher shortages, limited infrastructure, inadequate teaching–learning materials, and restricted digital connectivity. These conditions may affect the quality of instruction and students' opportunities to develop essential competencies. Family circumstances can further influence this comparison. Urban students may have greater access to libraries, tuition, and digital learning platforms, whereas rural students in economically disadvantaged households may depend more heavily on school-based support. However, these patterns are not universal: well-resourced rural schools may outperform under-resourced urban schools, and socioeconomic disadvantage can affect learners in both settings. Therefore, geographical location should be examined alongside school resources, teacher effectiveness, family background, and access to supplementary learning opportunities.

Educational Equity in Government Schools

Educational equity means ensuring that all students have fair opportunities to succeed, regardless of their geographical location or socioeconomic circumstances. While learning achievement reflects the knowledge and skills students acquire, equity concerns the fairness of the conditions and resources supporting their progress. Differences in teacher availability, infrastructure, instructional quality, and academic assistance may create unequal opportunities for

rural and urban students. Promoting equity requires needs-based resource allocation rather than assuming that all schools have identical requirements. Rural schools may need stronger digital connectivity, improved infrastructure, and measures to address teacher shortages, while overcrowded or under-resourced urban schools may require additional classroom facilities and targeted academic support. The NEP 2020 emphasises equitable and inclusive education, reinforcing the need to address context-specific barriers. A meaningful rural–urban comparison must therefore consider both the resources available to students and their demonstrated competencies. Regular assessments, disaggregated educational data, teacher professional development, and timely remedial support can help identify disparities and guide interventions. The objective is to ensure that geographical location and socioeconomic circumstances do not unnecessarily restrict students' educational opportunities or outcomes.

FACTORS INFLUENCING RURAL–URBAN DIFFERENCES IN LEARNING ACHIEVEMENT

Rural–urban differences in learning achievement are shaped by the interaction of school-related, socioeconomic, technological, and community factors. Although urban schools may have certain resource advantages, these do not automatically translate into better educational outcomes. Examining these factors comparatively helps identify the conditions that facilitate or constrain students' learning in government schools and provides a basis for addressing educational disparities.

School Infrastructure and Learning Resources

School infrastructure and learning resources influence the quality of educational experiences in rural and urban government schools. Rural schools, particularly those in remote areas, may have limited access to well-equipped libraries, laboratories, functional classrooms, and teaching–learning materials. Urban schools may offer better facilities but can also experience overcrowding and pressure on available resources. These differences affect opportunities for practical learning, classroom participation, and competency development. School-level investment should therefore reflect actual resource needs rather than geographical assumptions.

Teacher Availability and Instructional Quality

Teacher availability and instructional quality are central to effective learning. Rural schools may experience greater difficulties in recruiting and retaining teachers, especially in remote locations and specialised subjects. Urban schools may have better access to subject specialists and professional development opportunities, although this advantage varies across institutions. Beyond teacher numbers, subject knowledge, pedagogical competence, regular attendance, and responsiveness to students' needs influence classroom effectiveness. Fair teacher deployment and continuous professional development are essential for addressing these differences.

Family Background and Socioeconomic Conditions

Family background shapes students' access to educational support beyond school. Urban families may have greater access to private tuition, libraries, and supplementary learning facilities, whereas some rural households face constraints associated with poverty, seasonal migration,

agricultural work, and limited educational resources. Nevertheless, low-income urban families may experience comparable disadvantages, while supportive rural households can foster strong academic progress. Parental education, study conditions at home, and encouragement are therefore important considerations when interpreting differences in student performance.

Digital Access and Learning Opportunities

Digital access can widen or reduce educational disparities. Urban students may benefit from comparatively reliable internet connectivity, digital devices, and technology-supported learning facilities. In some rural communities, poor connectivity, electricity interruptions, and limited device availability restrict these opportunities. However, affordability and digital literacy remain challenges for disadvantaged students in both settings. Effective digital inclusion requires not only access to technology but also the skills and guidance needed to use it for learning.

School Environment and Community Support

School climate and community participation influence students' engagement and educational progress. Rural schools may benefit from close-knit community relationships but face constraints in accessing specialised support services. Urban schools may offer wider educational networks while dealing with overcrowded classrooms, diverse student needs, or weaker individual attention. These patterns are not universal and depend on local circumstances. Supportive teacher–student relationships, parental involvement, inclusive practices, and active school management committees can strengthen learning environments in both settings.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF RURAL–URBAN LEARNING DISPARITIES

Rural–urban differences in learning achievement should be understood as the outcome of unequal educational opportunities rather than geographical location alone. Differences in school infrastructure, teacher availability, household resources, digital access, and instructional practices may contribute to variations in students' learning outcomes. However, these factors often overlap, making it difficult to attribute disparities to a single cause. A critical examination also requires distinguishing access to education from the quality of learning. School enrolment, attendance, and the availability of facilities do not necessarily indicate whether students have acquired the expected competencies. Similarly, the presence of infrastructure does not guarantee its effective use. Differences in teaching practices, classroom engagement, parental support, and opportunities for remedial instruction may influence the extent to which students benefit from available resources.

Moreover, rural–urban comparisons should avoid generalisations. Some rural government schools achieve positive outcomes despite resource constraints, while some urban schools experience overcrowding and socioeconomic disadvantage. Students' family backgrounds, school management, local conditions, and institutional effectiveness may explain variations that geographical categories alone cannot capture. Comparisons must therefore consider these interacting factors and use disaggregated evidence wherever available. Another concern is the uneven distribution of educational resources. Uniform allocation may not adequately address the distinct challenges faced by schools serving disadvantaged communities. Effective policy requires identifying specific needs, monitoring learning progress, and directing support towards students

and schools facing greater barriers. Evidence-based interventions should focus on measurable improvements in foundational literacy, numeracy, and other essential competencies. Overall, reducing rural–urban learning disparities requires moving beyond assumptions based on location to examine the conditions that shape educational opportunities and outcomes. Reliable comparative data, school-level assessment, and context-sensitive interventions are essential for identifying persistent gaps and strengthening equity in government school education.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND STRATEGIES FOR EQUITABLE LEARNING

Reducing rural–urban disparities require evidence-based policies that address differences in educational resources, teaching quality, and students' learning needs. Although geographical location can influence educational opportunities, its effects vary across educational stages and learning domains. Policy measures should therefore respond to identified gaps rather than assume that all rural or urban schools face the same challenges.

Role of Government Policies

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasises equitable, inclusive, and competency-based education. Its objectives require coordinated action by central, state, and local authorities to identify disadvantaged schools, allocate resources according to need, and monitor learning outcomes. NITI Aayog's analysis of PARAKH 2024 data reports broadly similar foundational-stage performance in rural and urban areas: language proficiency was 64% in rural areas and 63% in urban areas, while mathematics proficiency was 60% and 59%, respectively. These findings indicate that geographical differences at the foundational stage were marginal in the reported indicators. Government policies should consequently use disaggregated assessment data to identify specific weaknesses across locations, educational stages, and subjects. Coordination between educational authorities and schools can help ensure that interventions are directed towards learners and institutions with demonstrable needs.

Strengthening School Infrastructure and Teaching Quality

Adequate infrastructure and effective instruction are essential for improving learning opportunities. UDISE+ 2024–25 data indicate that 64.7% of schools had computer facilities and 63.5% had internet access nationally, demonstrating that digital provision remained incomplete. Investment should prioritise schools with inadequate or non-functional facilities, including classrooms, libraries, laboratories, electricity, and digital resources. Teacher deployment should reflect enrolment, subject requirements, and local staffing needs. Continuous professional development, competency-based teaching, formative assessment, and remedial instruction should complement infrastructure improvements to support measurable progress in learning.

Ensuring Equitable Learning Opportunities

Equitable learning requires identifying students' specific needs and providing appropriate academic support. NITI Aayog's analysis of PARAKH 2024 reports that urban students performed better than rural students at the middle stage across language, mathematics, science, and social science. This contrasts with the marginal rural–urban differences reported at the foundational stage, suggesting that disparities may vary across educational stages and subjects.

Schools should use regular assessments to identify learning gaps and provide targeted support in foundational literacy, numeracy, and subject-specific competencies. Digital initiatives should address barriers in connectivity, device availability, and digital literacy. Parental engagement, school management committees, and community participation can further support attendance and learning continuity. Interventions should be evaluated through comparable, disaggregated data to determine whether they improve student competencies and reduce identified disparities. Equitable school education requires needs-based resource allocation, effective teaching, targeted academic support, and systematic monitoring. Rural–urban comparisons should account for educational stage, subject, socioeconomic background, and school conditions. Policy success should ultimately be measured by improvements in students' competencies and reductions in avoidable learning disparities rather than by infrastructure provision or enrolment alone.

Conclusion

Rural–urban differences in learning achievement reflect the combined influence of school resources, teacher availability, instructional quality, socioeconomic conditions, and digital access. These disparities vary across educational stages and subjects, indicating that geographical location alone does not determine learning outcomes. The findings underscore the need to translate evidence into targeted policy action. In line with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, education authorities should prioritise needs-based resource allocation, equitable teacher deployment, competency-based assessment, remedial instruction, and accessible learning resources. Regular monitoring of disaggregated achievement data is essential to evaluate progress and address persistent gaps. Future research should examine rural–urban learning disparities across states, socioeconomic groups, and educational stages to identify effective interventions. Ultimately, educational equity requires policies that move beyond enrolment and infrastructure to achieve measurable improvements in student competencies, ensuring fair learning opportunities for all.

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