IJRAR.ORG E-ISSN: 2348-1269, P-ISSN: 2349-5138

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH AND ANALYTICAL REVIEWS (IJRAR) | IJRAR.ORG

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

ACCESS TO EDUCATION FOR MARGINALIZED URBAN POPULATIONS THROUGH CORPORATION SCHOOLS

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Abstract : This paper examines the extent to which Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) in India, through the schools they directly manage — commonly termed Corporation or Municipal Corporation schools — ensure equitable access to education for marginalized urban populations. Marginalized groups in Indian cities, including migrant labour families, slum-dwelling households, and other economically disadvantaged communities, depend disproportionately on Corporation-managed schools as their primary, often sole, avenue to formal education, since these schools are tuition-free and located within or near low-income neighbourhoods. Drawing on secondary data from UDISE+ reports (2023–24 and 2024–25), national dropout and enrolment statistics, and existing research on urban educational access, the study analyses enrolment trends, social-category disparities, gender gaps, dropout patterns, and infrastructural constraints affecting access for marginalized populations. The findings indicate that while overall school enrolment in India has been gradually declining in absolute numbers, Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe children remain under-represented relative to their population share at the secondary level, dropout rates rise sharply beyond the elementary stage, and school infrastructure gaps in digital and accessibility facilities continue to constrain effective access. The paper concludes with recommendations to strengthen the role of Urban Local Bodies as inclusive access providers for marginalized populations through targeted outreach, infrastructure investment, and stronger convergence with national access-oriented schemes.

IndexTerms - Access to Education, Urban Local Bodies, Corporation Schools, Marginalized Populations, UDISE+, Enrolment, Dropout.

I. INTRODUCTION

Access to education is widely recognized as the first and most fundamental precondition for educational development; without physical, economic, and social access, questions of quality and learning outcomes become secondary. In rapidly urbanizing India, access is not uniformly distributed — marginalized populations such as migrant labour families, slum residents, and children of daily-wage workers face persistent barriers that better-off urban households do not encounter. Corporation-managed schools, being tuition-free, geographically embedded within low-income neighbourhoods, and administratively linked to local welfare schemes, have historically functioned as the default access point for these populations.

As India's urban population continues to grow, Urban Local Bodies — as the tier of government constitutionally mandated under the 74th Amendment to manage municipal schools — occupy a central role in determining whether marginalized urban children can access formal schooling. Yet the mere presence of Corporation schools does not guarantee access; enrolment, retention, and regular attendance among marginalized children are shaped by a combination of distance, documentation requirements, economic compulsion, and the overall responsiveness of local governance structures to these barriers.

This paper investigates patterns of access to education for marginalized urban populations through Corporation-managed schools in India, drawing on national data to identify the structural factors that either facilitate or obstruct that access.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The primary objective of this study is to examine the level and pattern of access to education among marginalized urban populations through schools managed by Urban Local Bodies in India.

The specific objectives are:

- To assess national enrolment trends in government/Corporation-managed schools and their implications for marginalized populations.
- To examine social-category disparities — particularly among Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes — in access to secondary education.
- To analyze gender-wise patterns in school enrolment and their relevance to marginalized urban households.
- To identify infrastructural and administrative barriers that limit access for marginalized populations in Corporation schools.

- To suggest measures for strengthening the role of Urban Local Bodies as inclusive access providers for marginalized urban children.

III. BACKGROUND

India's urban population, projected to exceed 600 million by 2036, includes a substantial and growing share of migrant and informally employed households concentrated in slums, resettlement colonies, and peripheral industrial zones. These populations face systemic exclusion from private and even many state-run aided schools due to documentation requirements, admission timing, and the cost of allied expenses such as uniforms and transport. Corporation schools, being free of tuition and located within or near low-income settlements, have consequently become a principal formal education access channel for these groups.

National data reflects both progress and continuing gaps in this access architecture. According to the Ministry of Education's UDISE+ 2023–24 report, total school enrolment in India stood at 24.8 crore students, a decline from 25.18 crore in 2022–23 and 26.02 crore in 2018–19, a trend attributed partly to demographic shifts and partly to improved data deduplication following the introduction of Aadhaar-linked student records. Within this overall picture, enrolment among marginalized social categories continues to show disparities relative to their share of the population, particularly at the secondary and higher secondary levels where access barriers compound with age.

IV. AREA OF STUDY

The study focuses on schools managed by Urban Local Bodies (Municipal Corporations, Municipal Councils, and Nagar Panchayats) across India, drawing on national-level UDISE+ data with reference to state-level patterns, including Tamil Nadu, where Corporation-managed schools form a significant part of the urban government school network. The study gives particular attention to enrolment and access indicators relevant to marginalized populations — Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, minorities, and economically weaker sections — who form the predominant student base in Corporation schools nationally.

The study is confined to government (Corporation-managed) schools and excludes private and state-run aided institutions, in order to focus specifically on the population segment most dependent on Urban Local Body-provided education.

V. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Global Perspective

International literature on educational access consistently identifies poverty, migration, and distance as primary correlates of non-enrolment and dropout among disadvantaged urban populations (UNESCO, 2021). Studies on decentralized urban service delivery note that local governments with strong outreach mechanisms are generally more effective at reaching mobile and marginalized populations than centrally administered systems (Winkler & Gershberg, 2000).

Indian Context

National data compiled through UDISE+ shows that while Gross Enrolment Ratios have stabilized near 90 percent at the elementary level, they decline substantially at the secondary (78.7 percent) and higher secondary (58.4 percent) stages, reflecting the compounding effect of economic pressure and access barriers as children grow older (Ministry of Education, UDISE+ 2023–24 and 2024–25 Reports). Research on out-of-school children highlights those socio-economic factors, gender disparity, and child labour remain the principal drivers of exclusion, disproportionately affecting children from marginalized communities (Education for All in India, 2023).

Social Category Disparities

UDISE+ 2024–25 data indicates that Scheduled Caste students constitute 19.2 percent of secondary enrolment against a 20.8 percent population share, while Scheduled Tribe students constitute 10.1 percent of secondary enrolment against an 8.6 percent population share — figures that reveal persistent under-representation for Scheduled Castes specifically at the secondary stage despite overall gains (Ministry of Education, 2025).

Gaps in Existing Research

While national-level data on enrolment and dropout by social category is well documented, research specifically examining how individual Urban Local Bodies translate this national picture into local access outcomes — through outreach, documentation flexibility, and infrastructure — remains comparatively limited. This paper draws on available national data to build a foundation for such Corporation-level analysis.

VI. HYPOTHESIS

Primary Hypothesis (H_1)

There is a significant positive relationship between the outreach and inclusiveness of Urban Local Body governance mechanisms and the level of access to education among marginalized urban populations.

Null Hypothesis (H_0)

There is no significant relationship between Urban Local Body governance mechanisms and the level of access to education among marginalized urban populations.

Sub-Hypotheses

- H_{1a}: Social categories with lower enrolment share relative to population share face greater access barriers in the transition from elementary to secondary education.
- H_{1b}: Gender disparity in enrolment reflects underlying access barriers specific to girls from marginalized households.
- H_{1c}: Schools with weaker infrastructure (digital facilities, accessibility features) show greater difficulty retaining marginalized students.

VII. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design based on secondary data, examining national and state-level indicators of enrolment, access barriers, and retention relevant to marginalized populations in Corporation-managed schools.

Data Sources

- UDISE+ 2023–24 and 2024–25 Reports (Ministry of Education, Government of India): For national enrolment, GER/NER, dropout, and infrastructure data.
- National Family Health Survey and Census-based population data: For social-category population share comparisons.
- Education for All in India / Prof. Arun C. Mehta's UDISE+ analyses: For interpretive commentary on national trends.
- Government of Tamil Nadu, Department of School Education: For state-level context on Corporation school administration.

Indicators Analyzed

- National school enrolment trend (2018–19 to 2023–24).
- Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) by school stage.
- Secondary enrolment share vs. population share for SC/ST categories.
- Secondary-level dropout rate: national average vs. high-dropout states.
- Gender share of total school enrolment.
- School infrastructure functionality (digital facilities, accessibility).

The analysis relies on descriptive statistics and comparative interpretation of nationally published administrative data. As the study uses secondary data, it does not include primary household-level surveys, though it draws on published survey findings for context.

VIII. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

This section presents the analysis of access patterns relevant to marginalized populations in Corporation-managed schools, based on national UDISE+ data.

National Enrolment Trend

Total school enrolment in India has declined from 26.02 crore in 2018–19 to 24.8 crore in 2023–24, a trend the Ministry of Education attributes in part to improved deduplication of student records through Aadhaar linkage, and in part to genuine demographic and attrition factors (Ministry of Education, UDISE+ 2023–24 Report).

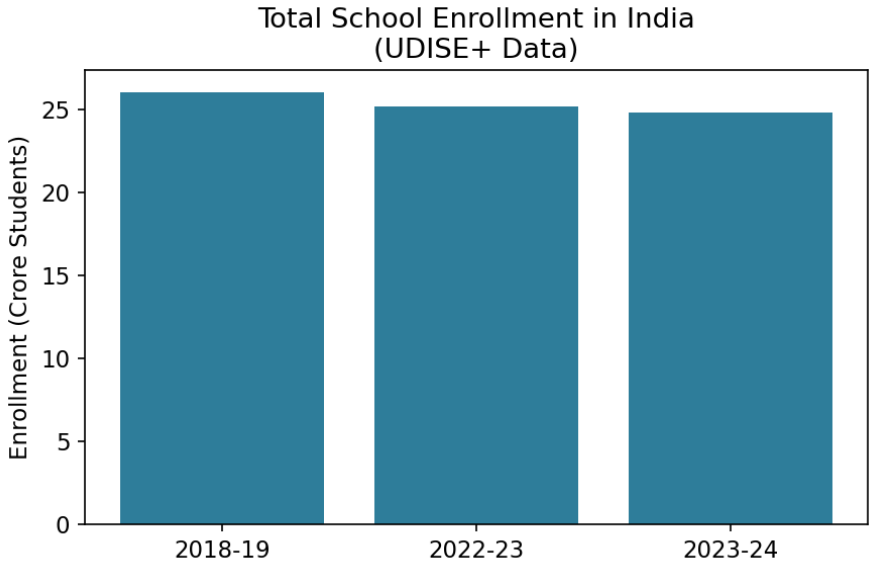


Figure 1: Total school enrollment in India (UDISE+ data)

Gross Enrolment Ratio by School Stage

GER data reveals a clear decline in participation as students progress through the school system — from near-universal levels at the elementary stage to 78.7 percent at secondary and 58.4 percent at higher secondary, reflecting the cumulative effect of economic and access barriers that disproportionately affect marginalized households (UDISE+ 2024–25 Report).

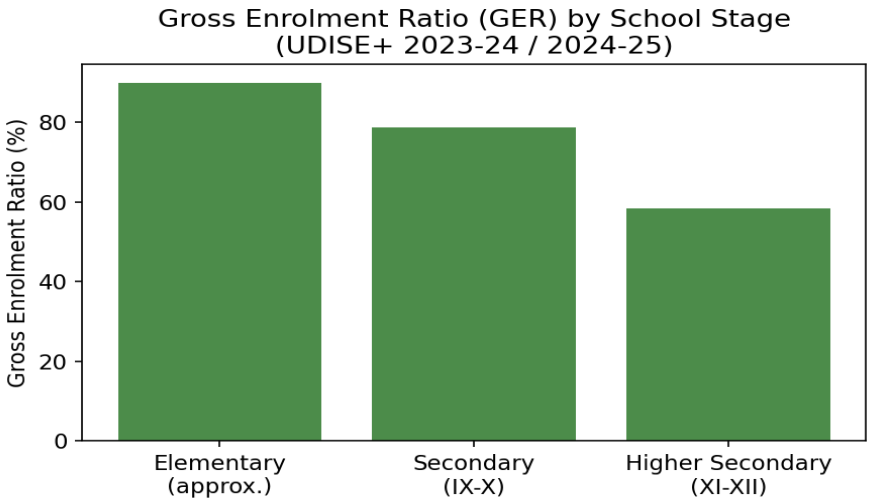


Figure 2: Gross enrolment ratio (GER) by school stage

Social Category Representation

Comparison of secondary enrolment share against population share shows Scheduled Caste students under-represented (19.2 percent enrolment vs. 20.8 percent population share), while Scheduled Tribe students show marginally higher representation (10.1 percent vs. 8.6 percent), though state-level variation is considerable — for instance, Uttar Pradesh's ST secondary GER is reported at just 55 percent (UDISE+ 2024–25 Report).

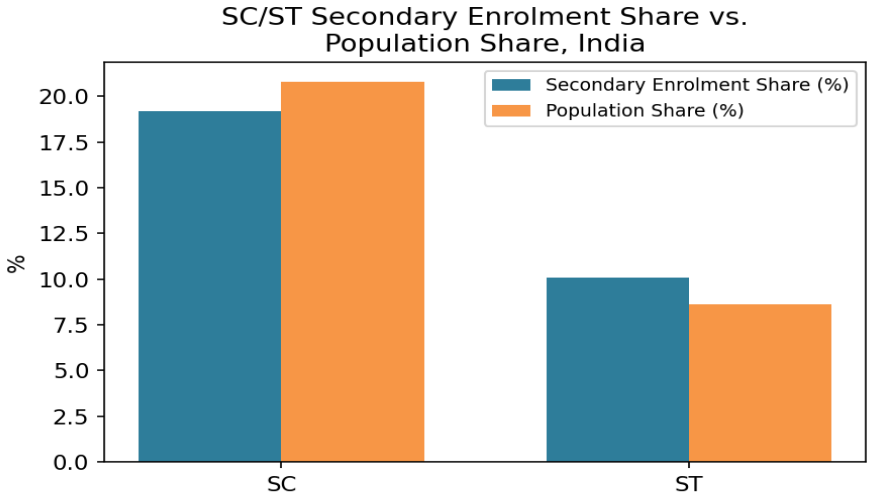


Figure 3: SC/ST secondary enrolment share vs. population share, India

Dropout Patterns

The national secondary dropout rate stands at 11.5 percent, an improvement from 14.2 percent previously, but this average masks significant state variation — West Bengal reports a secondary dropout rate of 20.2 percent and Meghalaya 17.4 percent, both considerably above the national average (UDISE+ 2024–25 Report).

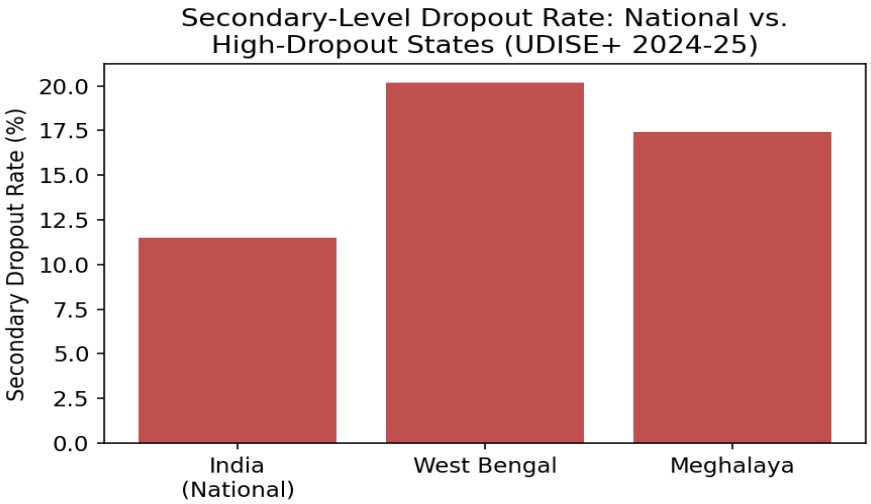


Figure 4: Secondary-Level dropout rate — national vs. high-Dropout states

Gender Representation

Girls comprise 48.4 percent of total school enrolment nationally, up from 48.1 percent the previous year, with the Gender Parity Index exceeding 1.0 across most levels — indicating that, at the aggregate national level, gender parity in enrolment has been substantially achieved, though this masks continuing disparities within specific marginalized sub-groups (UDISE+ 2024–25 Report).

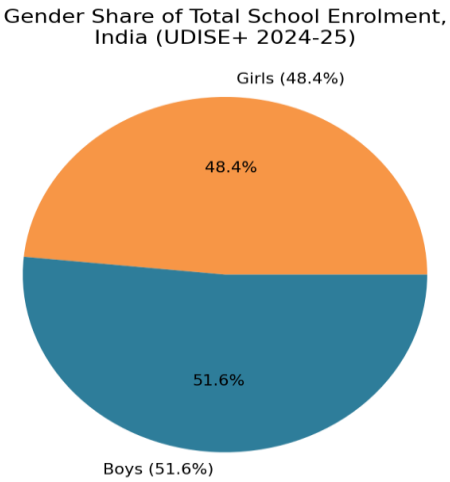


Figure 5: Gender share of total school enrolment, India

Infrastructure Constraints

While basic facilities such as electricity and gender-specific toilets are reported in over 90 percent of schools, digital and accessibility infrastructure remains considerably weaker — functional computers are available in only 57 percent of schools, internet access in 54 percent, and accessibility ramps in 52 percent, constraints that affect Corporation schools serving marginalized populations most acutely given their generally older infrastructure (UDISE+ 2023–24 Report).

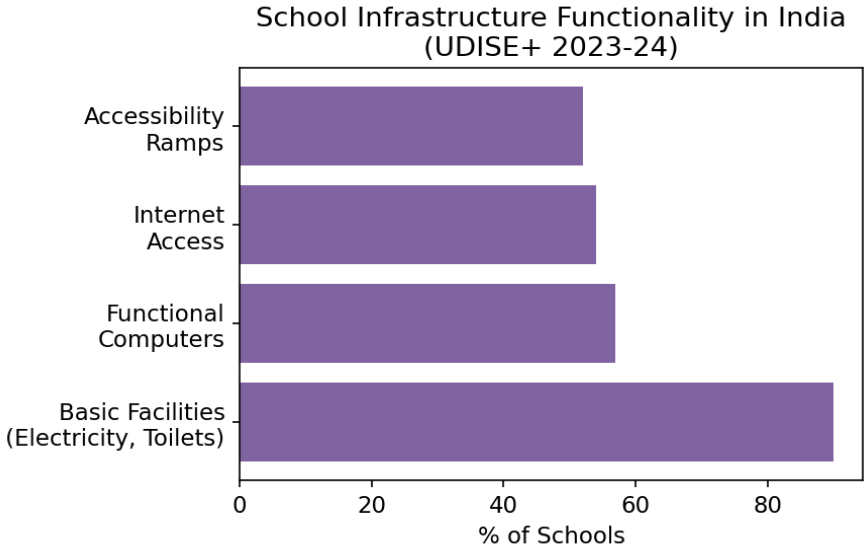


Figure 6: School infrastructure functionality in India

IX. FINDINGS

Enrolment Findings

- Total national school enrolment declined by approximately 1.22 crore students between 2018–19 and 2023–24, a change attributed to both improved data accuracy and genuine demographic shifts.
- GER falls sharply from near-universal at the elementary stage to 58.4 percent at higher secondary, indicating that access barriers intensify as marginalized children grow older.
- Scheduled Caste students remain under-represented in secondary enrolment relative to their population share, while Scheduled Tribe representation shows greater state-level variation.

Dropout and Gender Findings

- National secondary dropout rate stands at 11.5 percent but exceeds 20 percent in some states, indicating substantial regional disparity in retention.
- Girls' enrolment share has reached near-parity nationally (48.4 percent), though this aggregate figure may mask continuing gaps among specific marginalized sub-groups such as migrant and construction-worker households.

- Female teacher representation has risen only modestly in government schools over the past five years, from 43 percent to 46 percent nationally.

Infrastructure Findings

- Over 90 percent of schools report basic facilities, but fewer than 60 percent have functional computers or internet access.
- Only 52 percent of schools have accessibility ramps, a gap with direct implications for children with disabilities among marginalized populations.
- Underutilization of infrastructure is reported in several states, suggesting resource allocation rather than sheer scarcity is part of the access challenge.

X. CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

Urban Local Bodies managing Corporation schools face several structural challenges in ensuring universal access for marginalized populations. Migration-linked mobility makes it difficult to track and retain children across academic years, particularly for seasonal and circular migrant families. Documentation requirements, though intended for administrative accuracy, can function as an unintended barrier for undocumented migrant and slum households. Budgetary constraints limit the scale of outreach and infrastructure upgrades that individual Corporations can undertake, and declining overall government school enrolment nationally — alongside rising school closures in some states — adds pressure on remaining institutions serving marginalized populations.

Research Limitations

- The study relies on national and state-aggregated secondary data and does not include city-specific or household-level primary surveys.
- UDISE+ 2023–24 data reflects a significant methodological shift (individual student-wise records) that limits direct comparability with pre-2022–23 figures.
- The analysis does not capture very recent policy or funding changes that individual states or Urban Local Bodies may have introduced after the reference data was published.

XI. ISSUES FACED BY ULBS IN ENSURING ACCESS TO EDUCATION FOR MARGINALIZED POPULATIONS

Migration-Linked Enrolment Discontinuity

The seasonal and circular nature of labour migration in Indian cities means that children frequently exit and re-enter the schooling system, often at different schools, with no standardized national transfer mechanism to preserve academic continuity for migrant children.

Declining Government School Enrolment and Closures

National data shows a decline in government schools from 10.3 lakh (2019–20) to 10.1 lakh (2024–25), with the steepest closures in states such as Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, and Karnataka — a trend that concentrates remaining marginalized student populations into fewer, potentially more resource-strained institutions (Ministry of Education, Parliamentary data, 2025).

Documentation Barriers

Admission processes that require birth certificates, residence proof, or Aadhaar linkage disproportionately exclude undocumented migrant and slum households, despite Right to Education provisions that technically permit admission without such documents.

Infrastructure and Digital Divide

With functional computers and internet access present in only around half of all schools nationally, Corporation schools serving marginalized populations — often older, urban-core buildings — face particular difficulty keeping pace with digital learning requirements introduced under recent education policy reforms.

Fragmented Outreach Capacity

Enrolment drives and out-of-school child tracking are implemented unevenly across Urban Local Bodies nationally, dependent on the administrative initiative of individual Corporations rather than a standardized, resourced protocol.

XII. GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009

The RTE Act mandates free and compulsory education for children aged 6–14 and explicitly prohibits denial of admission for want of documents, providing the legal basis for inclusive access in Corporation schools nationwide.

Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan

This centrally sponsored scheme funds enrolment drives, bridge courses for out-of-school and migrant children, and residential/non-residential special training centres, implemented through state and Urban Local Body school systems across the country.

National Education Policy (NEP) 2020

NEP 2020 identifies migrant and marginalized urban children as a priority group requiring targeted access interventions, including tracking systems and flexible school calendars, and sets a target of universal school education GER by 2030.

PM POSHAN (Mid-Day Meal Scheme)

Beyond its nutritional role, PM POSHAN functions as a significant enrolment and retention incentive in government and Corporation schools, though its coverage — currently reaching about 41.8 percent of all enrolled students nationally — remains limited to government and government-aided institutions (Ministry of Education, 2025).

Tamil Nadu State Initiatives

Tamil Nadu's long-standing welfare architecture for government and Corporation schools, including free uniform distribution and its historic Noon Meal Scheme, has been widely cited as contributing to the state's comparatively strong school retention indicators relative to national averages.

XIII. SUGGESTIONS

Simplify Admission Documentation for Migrant Children

Urban Local Bodies should institutionalize a no-documentation-refusal policy consistent with RTE provisions, using self-declaration and subsequent verification rather than upfront document mandates.

Establish Standardized Out-of-School Child Tracking

A standardized, nationally guided but locally implemented digital tracking mechanism should be established to identify and follow up with out-of-school and irregularly attending children in Corporation school catchment areas.

Introduce Portable Academic Records for Migrant Children

A portable, digitally accessible academic record system would allow migrant children to re-enrol without loss of grade level or learning continuity when families relocate within or across cities.

Prioritize Digital Infrastructure Investment

Given that fewer than 60 percent of schools nationally have functional computers or internet access, targeted investment in Corporation schools serving marginalized populations should be prioritized to close this digital access gap.

Strengthen Convergence with National Welfare Schemes

Closer coordination between Corporation education administration and schemes such as PM POSHAN and Samagra Shiksha would help ensure that eligible marginalized families are proactively linked to enrolment incentives.

Address State-Level Dropout Hotspots

Given the wide variation in dropout rates across states, targeted interventions in high-dropout states and districts — rather than uniform national approaches — would more effectively address the specific access barriers faced by marginalized populations in those areas.

XIV. CONCLUSION

This study has examined patterns of access to education for marginalized urban populations through Corporation-managed schools in India, drawing on national UDISE+ data. The evidence confirms that Corporation schools function as a critical formal educational access channel for economically weaker and marginalized households, even as national enrolment figures show gradual decline and persistent disparities by social category, gender, and infrastructure across the school system.

While gender parity in enrolment has been substantially achieved at the aggregate level and dropout rates have improved nationally, significant gaps remain — in social-category representation at the secondary stage, in state-level dropout variation, and in the digital and accessibility infrastructure needed to sustain quality access. Strengthening documentation flexibility, out-of-school child tracking, and infrastructure investment emerge as the most actionable levers available to Urban Local Bodies to close these access gaps and fulfil their constitutional mandate as custodians of urban education for the country's most vulnerable populations.

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