

Business Standard

Road to Viksit Bharat runs through a strengthened NIPUN Bharat

Doubling down on the National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy will yield long-lasting growth multipliers

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Representative Picture

Children entering India's Balvatikas and pre-primary classrooms this year will turn 24 in 2047. They are the builders, leaders, and enablers of a Viksit Bharat.

Economists have found that the drivers of long-term growth are not years of schooling but rather the quality of schooling. They show that improving a nation's learning levels by one standard deviation leads to roughly two percentage points of additional GDP growth.

A basic building block for children to be able to learn at higher levels of schooling is foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) — the ability of a child to read with meaning, write with understanding and solve basic arithmetic problems such as addition and subtraction by Grade 3.

To achieve FLN across the country, the government launched the National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy (NIPUN Bharat) Mission in July 2021. Its first five years have demonstrated the government's ability to institutionalise FLN. The next phase must build decisively on this foundation by deepening what has worked,

resourcing what is new, and cementing hard-won gains. The success of NIPUN's next five years is critical in the march to a Viksit Bharat.

Green shoots of progress via NIPUN are clearly visible. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2024 records the sharpest improvement in foundational learning India has seen in two decades. Grade 3 numeracy is up seven percentage points since 2022, and reading is up three percentage points. NCERT's national assessment, PARAKH Rashtriya Sarvekshan (PRS) 2024, confirms the trend.

According to PARAKH, Grade 3 students score an average of 64 per cent in language and 60 per cent in mathematics nationally.

A critical and remarkable point is buried in these results. Rural India is now outperforming urban India, and girls are outperforming boys. NIPUN has reached the children who were probably the most disadvantaged first, inverting the geography of educational disadvantage. Despite these praiseworthy achievements, challenges remain. Structural problems need to be addressed. The imminent extension of the NIPUN Bharat Mission will extend its mandate to Grade 5. This extension must be seen as an imperative to strengthen the programme, broaden its scope, and ensure that the roughly ₹18,000 crore spent since inception are leveraged effectively. For this, we must more than double the annual financial outlay from around ₹5,000 crore to over ₹10,000 crore.

While ₹10,000 crore may seem large, it comes down to roughly ₹1,500 per child for the 65 million children in pre-primary to Grade 5 in government and government-aided schools, which is less than ₹9 a day, a cost less than a cup of tea. While existing line items may be increased to ₹6,000 crore due to the inclusion of Grades 3-5, new line items will require an additional ₹4,000 crore. These are the key focus areas:

Firstly, allocations must be made to support students who are lagging. By Grade 5, 56 per cent of students cannot read a Grade 2 text, and 70 per cent lack basic arithmetic skills. This makes structured FLN remediation across Grades 3 to 5 a priority. It is necessary to provide remedial Teacher Learning Materials (TLMs) – low-cost, play-based teaching tools that support learning.

At an estimated cost of ₹100 per child, reaching this cohort will cost approximately ₹200 crore.

Secondly, nearly 57 per cent of children entering Grade 1 are not adequately prepared – lacking the ability to recognise patterns, numbers, words and shapes, essentially basic literacy and numeracy markers that enable future learning. To solve this, significant focus must be placed on institutionalising Balvatikas – the three-year pre-school programme that equips children for Grade 1.

Rather than spreading resources thin, a sharper approach would be to prioritise the 15 per cent of schools with enrolments greater than 150 that collectively serve 60 per cent of all primary pupils. This means hiring educators in these schools, equipping them with TLMs, and providing learning spaces for Balvatikas. This would cost around an additional ₹2,500 crore per year, a focused investment that maximises reach and impact.

A third critical focus is assessments — more precise measurement of FLN skills. There is also a need to introduce Key Stage Assessments (KSAs) for Grades 3 and 5 to accurately gauge grade-level competencies, as envisaged in NEP 2020. Accurate assessment would require an investment of ₹450 crore.

Fourthly, teachers are the engines of NIPUN. Providing academic support and mentoring to teachers at scale requires a reimagined approach where technology plays a central role. A concrete step is to build the NIPUN Sahayak Programme, which delivers online training and mentoring through the Vidya Samiksha Kendra (VSK), bringing more frequent, targeted, and measurable support directly to teachers in their classrooms. This new outlay would amount to ₹480 crore per year.

Finally, NIPUN Bharat should be declared a flagship mission, akin to others such as the Swachh Bharat Mission. Approximately ₹500 crore should be ring-fenced for Jan Bhagidhari Abhiyan, with the Centre contributing ₹300 crore and states contributing ₹200 crore, translating to approximately ₹25 lakh per district for grassroots awareness and community participation.

Every country that turned foundational learning into prosperity built on a similar philosophy.

South Korea went from 22 per cent literacy in 1945 to industrial takeoff within 25 years by focusing on FLN. Vietnam's three-decade bet on early-grade learning now has its children outreading those of the US and UK. India in 2026 stands exactly 21 years from 2047, precisely the timeline these transformations require to bear fruit. At just ₹1,700 per child per year, history has rarely offered India a better opportunity.

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