

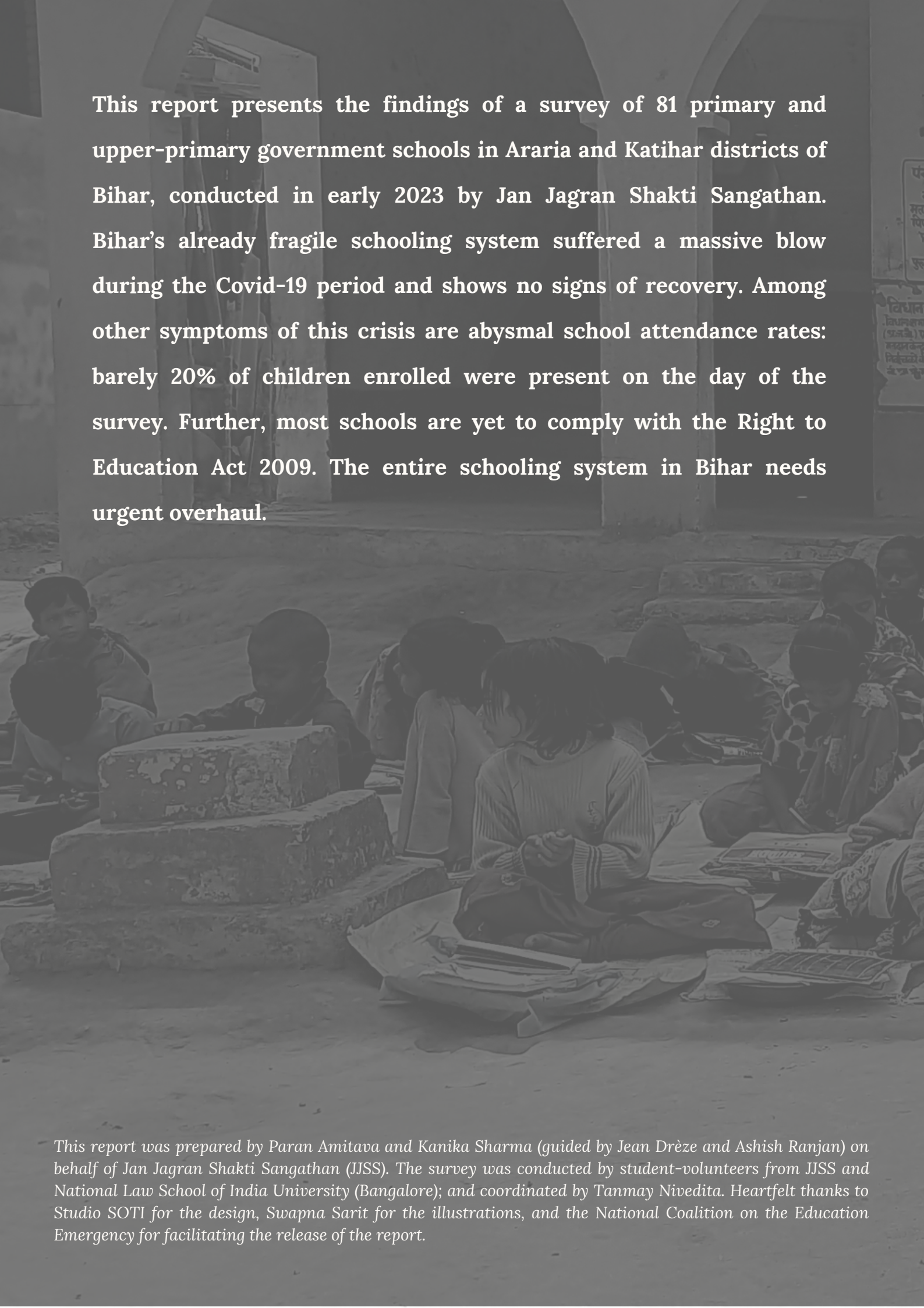
Where Are the Kids?

The Curious Case of Government Schools in Bihar

Jan Jagran Shakti Sangathan



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A group of children are sitting on the ground in front of a school building. They are wearing school uniforms and some are holding books. The building has arched doorways and a sign on the wall. The scene is in black and white.

This report presents the findings of a survey of 81 primary and upper-primary government schools in Araria and Katihar districts of Bihar, conducted in early 2023 by Jan Jagran Shakti Sangathan. Bihar's already fragile schooling system suffered a massive blow during the Covid-19 period and shows no signs of recovery. Among other symptoms of this crisis are abysmal school attendance rates: barely 20% of children enrolled were present on the day of the survey. Further, most schools are yet to comply with the Right to Education Act 2009. The entire schooling system in Bihar needs urgent overhaul.

This report was prepared by Paran Amitava and Kanika Sharma (guided by Jean Drèze and Ashish Ranjan) on behalf of Jan Jagran Shakti Sangathan (JJSS). The survey was conducted by student-volunteers from JJSS and National Law School of India University (Bangalore); and coordinated by Tanmay Nivedita. Heartfelt thanks to Studio SOTI for the design, Swapna Sarit for the illustrations, and the National Coalition on the Education Emergency for facilitating the release of the report.

Survey Highlights

Government schools in Bihar are short of teachers. Two-thirds of primary schools and almost all upper-primary schools in the sample have a pupil-teacher ratio above 30, the maximum permissible under the Right to Education Act.

Pupil attendance is abysmal. In primary schools, **only 23% of children enrolled were present at the time of the survey.** Pupil attendance was even lower in upper-primary schools – just 20%.

Teachers routinely inflate attendance figures in school registers. But **even the inflated figures are very low: 44% and 40% in primary and upper-primary schools respectively.**

School closures due to Covid-19 caused massive learning losses. **Half of the schools reported that most students in classes 3-5 had forgotten to read and write by the time schools reopened.**

Little has been done to make up for these losses and other adverse effects of prolonged school closure on children's education and wellbeing.

Schools have dismal infrastructure and amenities, especially at the primary level. **Most primary schools (90%) have no proper boundary wall, playground or library.**

Some schools (9% of all schools in the sample) do not even have a building.

One-fifth of schools reported that **the midday meal (MDM) budget was inadequate.** Many MDM-related issues emerged: excessive work burden; under-budgeting for eggs; multiple cooking arrangements; and Brahminical opposition to eggs.

Bihar's so-called Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) system for textbooks and uniforms is a failure. In most schools, **many students have no textbooks or uniforms,** either because they did not receive DBT money or because they used it for other purposes.

Government schools in Bihar seem to be in danger of mass displacement by private coaching centres.

The Schooling Emergency in North Bihar

The importance of school education can hardly be overstated. In Bihar, quality education for all could be a powerful force of economic and social change. Bihar's schooling system, however, is not up to the mark. Earlier evidence shows that schools in Bihar perform poorly across indicators and suffer a manufactured crisis due to ill-informed education policies. They persistently fall short of the norms prescribed by the Right to Education (RTE) Act, and display severe shortages of teachers, textbooks, uniforms, basic infrastructure, and a meaningful learning environment. In 2014, a joint assessment by the Bihar government and ASER found that only 40% of students in grade IV and 60% students in grade VI could read a grade II level text. Additionally, most children were unable to integrate, infer or summarize whatever they had been able to read (ASER, 2014).

The Covid-19 pandemic and accompanying lockdowns hit Bihar's schooling system hard. Schools were closed for nearly two years, severely affecting children's education as well as stalling any progress in school infrastructure or work culture. While a minority of privileged children were able to study online or in private tuition, others were left to fend for themselves. This has exacerbated existing inequalities in educational opportunities. Worrying evidence from neighbouring Jharkhand shows that many children forgot what they had learnt prior to the crisis, and that no serious measures have been taken to help them catch up (Gyan Vigyan Samiti Jharkhand, 2022).

What is the state of the schooling system in North Bihar? To understand this, Jan Jagran Shakti Sangathan conducted a survey of primary and upper-primary schools in Katihar and Araria districts in January-February 2023. This report presents the main findings of the survey.

The JJSS Survey

The survey was conducted in government primary and upper-primary schools with at least 50% enrolment of students from socially disadvantaged groups (SC, ST, OBC, Muslim).¹ It was conducted across 11 blocks of Araria and Katihar districts. In each block, we created a target list of 10 schools (5 primary and 5 upper-primary) selected at random. Due to the paucity of time, all schools of the sample could not be covered. A total of 81 schools were surveyed (40 primary and 41 upper-primary). Although this sample is not representative of all government schools in Bihar, it is likely to be fairly representative of the schools accessible to disadvantaged children in North Bihar.

Once a target school was located, the survey team (student-volunteers from JJSS and National Law School of India University, Bangalore) reached the school during official school hours without prior announcement. This was done to ensure that schools were surveyed and observed in their usual state as far as possible. Three complementary methods of data collection were used. First, teams conducted a structured interview with the senior-most teacher (henceforth “respondent teacher”) of the school. The questionnaire covered topics related to infrastructure, teaching methods, post-Covid remedial measures, midday meals, and challenges and opinions related to improving the school. Second, the teams examined school records such as enrolment and attendance registers. Third, teams recorded their own observations about the school, its students, and the surrounding context. These complementary methods help to view schooling in North Bihar from different angles. The survey teams also had occasional discussions with parents or children, but time and resources were too short to conduct formal interviews with them.

¹ In Bihar, upper-primary schools are colloquially called middle schools.

Inadequate, Ill-informed, and Ineffective



The survey reveals a serious failure to ensure even “minimum norms” of schooling in North Bihar. The issues that these schools face can be seen as a reflection of three distinct but interdependent failures: inadequate resources; ineffective policies; and indifferent action. The Covid-19 pandemic not only exacerbated these issues but also added new ones. We discuss these in detail below, but before that, we present a case study that gives a glimpse of what a neglected government school looks like in underprivileged areas of North Bihar.

A Neglected School in Rural Bihar

Primary School Santhali Tola (Lahtora, Araria) was not accessible by road, and one had to reach it by crossing farmlands. At first sight, we noticed how dilapidated it was. This school was meant mostly for a village of Santhals, a Scheduled Tribe whose socio-economic conditions are marked by extreme deprivation and marginalization. There were only two teachers employed in this school. While both were present, there did not seem to be any classes in the proper sense of the term. All the children had been made to sit in the corridor on thin sacks which barely seemed to protect them against the cold. There were hardly any benches and chairs in the classrooms. The only usable furniture there, we were told, was bought personally by the teachers.

Having to incur expenses in the service of the functioning of the school was not limited to furniture alone. The teachers, in their interview, also reported that they had to cover the balance for the mid-day meals out of their pockets as the funds they were given were insufficient. The cooking shed of this school was also in a very poor condition and its roof had been blown away in the last rainy season, creating a hygiene problem.

We could not see many students in uniform. The teachers said the main reason for this was that the uniform money transferred to the parents' accounts was often used for other purposes. The same applied to the money meant for buying textbooks - most did not have them. The lack of textbooks is a major concern as it is essential to ensure that teaching in schools happens as per the curriculum and that students from underprivileged communities do not get left behind academically.

Perhaps the most striking thing about this school was its poor accessibility. We were told by locals and the teachers that during the rainy season, one could reach the school only by boat and classes had to be conducted on the roof as everything below was flooded. One wonders how in such an environment, there could be any joy in learning at all.

Shashank Sinha, Student Volunteer (NLSIU Bangalore)

Shortage of Teachers



Bihar is one of India's most densely populated states. The number of children within a one-kilometre radius (the maximum distance from a habitation to the nearest school under the RTE Act) is often quite large. This may be the reason why primary and upper-primary schools in Bihar tend to have a large number of pupils. In our sample, primary schools had 147 students on average, and upper-primary schools as many as 488. The number of teachers failed to match these high enrolment figures: 4 teachers on average in primary schools, and 8 in upper-primary schools (Table 1). It might seem that 4 teachers would be able to run a primary school well, with nearly one teacher in each class and some grades being seated in the same classroom (multi-grade teaching). The reality is that when primary schools have less than 5 teachers, it translates into one class having no teacher.

Table 1: The Sample Schools

	Primary Schools	Upper-primary Schools
Number of sample schools	40	41
Average number of children enrolled	147	488
Average number of classrooms	4	9
Average number of teachers	4	8
Average pupil/teacher ratio	43	57

Note: Primary school = Classes 1-5. Upper-primary school = Classes 1-8.

Overall, the survey finds a high pupil-teacher ratio (PTR) in the sample schools. As per the RTE Act, for every 30 students there should be one teacher. The JJSS survey finds that 95% of the upper-primary schools and 65% of primary schools have a PTR above 30, thereby breaking this simple but important RTE norm. As shown in table 2, only 21% of all schools surveyed had a PTR of less than 30.

Table 2: Percentage Distribution of Schools by Pupil-Teacher Ratio

Pupil-teacher ratio	Primary schools (%)	Upper-primary schools (%)	All sample schools (%)
Less than 30	35	5	21
30 – 40	14	29	21
40 – 50	23	17	20
More than 50	28	49	38

During the interviews, many respondent teachers reported being aware of the dire need for additional teachers to run their schools. But more teachers are yet to come. Schools in our sample are understaffed. Based on total students and RTE norms for PTR, the sample schools are short of 582 teachers (71 in primary and 511 in upper-primary). In other words, primary schools are working with just 67% of the number of teachers required to meet RTE norms, and upper-primary 41%. This shortage intensifies other problems in the schooling system.

Further, our sample schools showed high levels of teacher absenteeism. On an average, only 58% of appointed teachers were found on the school premises during the school visit. This number climbed to 63% for primary schools and dropped to 55% for upper-primary schools. A resource starved school with high teacher absenteeism is a recipe for a disaster. If primary schools, working with 67% of required teachers have only 63% of its teachers on duty; this translates into an effective teacher presence of just 42% of the norm. For upper-primary, this situation would be worse with only 23% of the prescribed number of teachers being on duty, in real terms.

The silver lining is that over 40% of the teachers in our sample are women (Appendix 1: Table A3). The presence of women teachers can influence safety and the chances of girl children completing schooling. Another positive is the social composition of the teaching cadre, which is similar to the social composition of the population in rural Bihar. Our survey found many teachers from SC, ST, OBC, and Muslim backgrounds (Appendix 1: Table A4). The increasing representation of women and socially disadvantaged groups among teachers in rural Bihar is an important step towards democratizing schools and reducing the social distance between teachers and children (or their families).

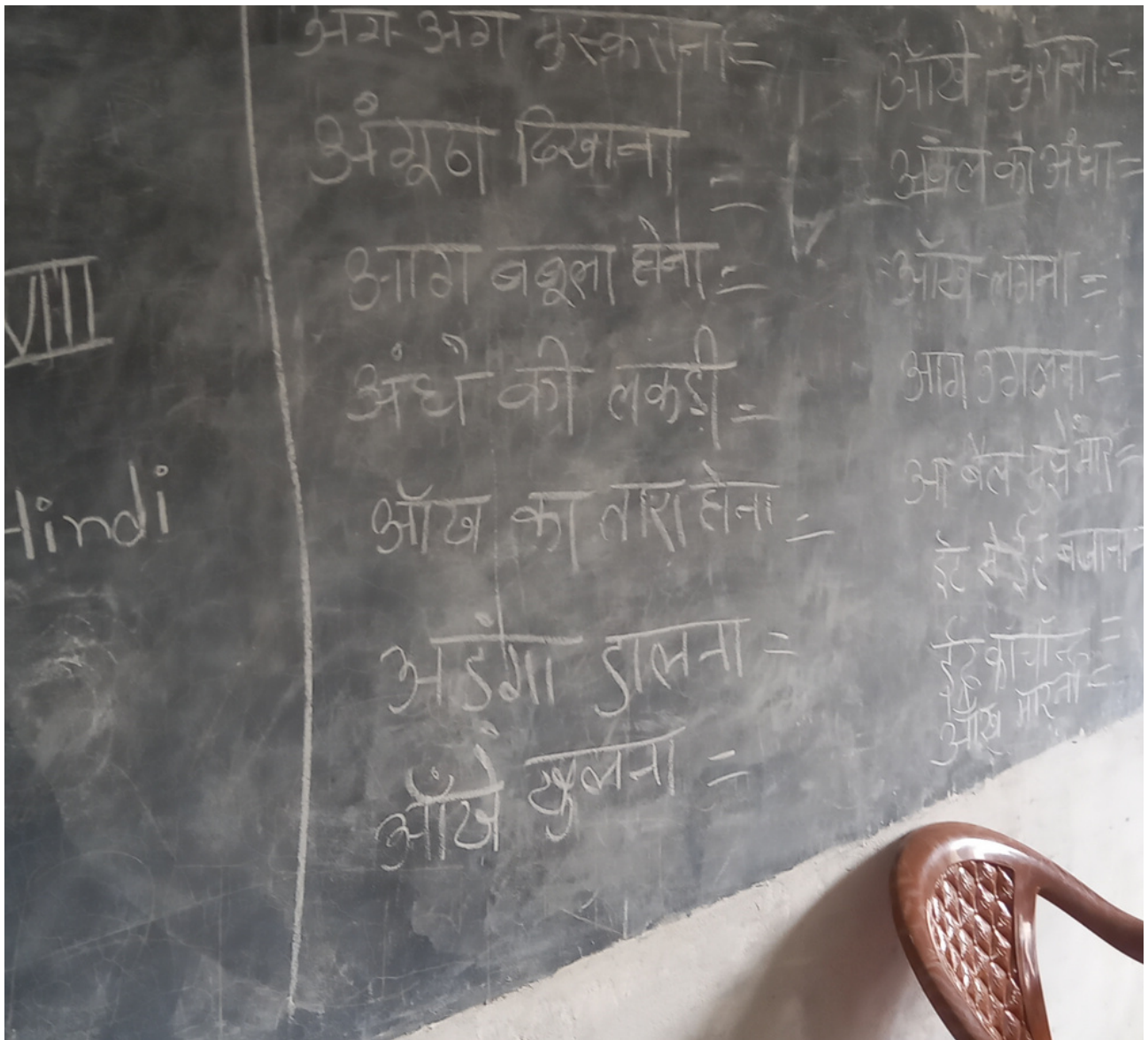


Figure 1: Teacher shortages cause multi-grade teaching which is known to be ineffective (PC: Harsh Raj and Shashank Sinha)

Abysmal Attendance and Routine Overreporting



High pupil attendance is the hallmark of a functional school. By this yardstick, most schools in North Bihar are dysfunctional. The JJSS survey used two ways to measure attendance. First, the survey teams were asked to check attendance registers and record the figure. Second, they were asked to count the children themselves. In a good school, it would not be unreasonable to expect pupil attendance to be above 90% on an average day, and above 80% every day. This survey found that pupil attendance in primary schools was as low as 44% according to the registers, and even lower – only 23% – based on a direct count. The corresponding figures for upper-primary schools were similar: 40% and 20% respectively. As shown in Table 3, only two percent of schools (in primary and upper-primary both) reported attendance of 60% or above. These attendance figures are extremely low and are a clear sign of dysfunctionality in schools.²

Table 3: Attendance Rates in the Sample Schools on the Day of the Survey

	Primary schools	Upper-primary schools
Average number of children enrolled (A)	147	488
Average number of children present:		
As per school register (B)	58	178
As per survey team (C)	28	92
Attendance rate (%)		
As per school register (B/A)	44	40
As per survey team (C/A)	23	20
Proportion of schools with more than 60% pupil attendance (%)	2	2
Proportion of schools with more than 50% pupil attendance (%)	23	7

² These attendance figures include 22 schools with zero attendance at the time of the survey (e.g. schools where children had already left when the survey team arrived, or where children had been attracted to a local wedding). Excluding these 22 schools, the attendance rates increase from 23% to 30% for primary schools, and from 20% to 26% in upper-primary schools.

We are not aware that such low school attendance rates have been observed anywhere earlier. There is an urgent need to ascertain whether this is a general pattern in rural Bihar, and if so, why attendance rates are so low. It is unlikely that this was just a seasonal effect because the survey period was not one of intensive agricultural activity or major festivals. Five partial explanations come to mind. First, enrolment may be inflated. Second, low classroom activity and teaching standards probably discourage children from attending regularly. Third, we observed that many children leave school after the midday meal to attend private tuitions. Fourth, the prolonged closure of schools during the Covid-19 crisis may have sapped children's school-going habits, or even created an impression that going to school is not important. Fifth, it is possible that the odd system of "DBT for textbooks" (discussed below) accelerated this exodus, not only by depriving many children of textbooks but also by providing them with cash for private tuitions. All these possibilities are alarming.

Apart from low attendance, the survey found inconsistencies between attendance registers and actual attendance: teachers routinely overreport attendance in the registers. They had two common excuses for overreporting. The first was related to midday meals. In Bihar, the government has priced the egg at five rupees when the market price is seven. This ends up creating a situation where schools would not have enough eggs for the children who are present unless the teacher over-reports the attendance to cover the gap in pricing. This excuse is a little lame since eggs are served only once a week. Second, teachers reported that if attendance on consecutive days had a large difference, they received show-cause notices from their higher-ups. To avoid such notices, teachers overreported students' attendance.



Figure 2: A classroom with barely any children in attendance
(PC: Priyansh Sinha and Rahul Malviya)

Lockdown Induced Learning Losses and Limited Remedial Measures



The Covid-19 crisis and accompanying lockdowns have severely affected children's education in India. After a gap of nearly two years, primary and upper-primary schools finally reopened in February 2022. Findings from Locked Out: Emergency Report on School Education, a survey conducted across 15 states and UTs including Bihar, found that only 8% of underprivileged rural children enrolled in primary or upper-primary schools were studying online regularly at the time of the survey and 37% were not studying at all. (Bakhla, Dreze, Khera & Paikra, 2021) Further, 48% of the children were unable to read more than just a few words. Other studies have also documented the adverse impact of prolonged school closures on children's education and wellbeing (UNICEF India, 2021; Ghatak et al, 2020).

In Bihar, the situation is even more worrying. When the respondent teachers were asked whether students in grades 3-5 had forgotten how to read and write when the schools reopened, the answer was a clear yes. Half of our sample schools reported that “most” students in those grades had forgotten to read and write. Only 3% of the schools said that none of them had forgotten to read and write.

Table 4: Teachers' Perceptions of Children's Reading and Writing Abilities Post-Covid

<i>“When the school reopened in early 2022, did you find that some children in Classes 3-5 had forgotten how to read and write?”</i>			
	Primary schools (%)	Upper-primary schools (%)	All sample schools (%)
Yes, most of them	58	47	52
Yes, many	5	17	11
Yes, some	23	27	25
Yes, just a few	12	6	9
No	2	3	3

Note: This is the assessment of “respondent teachers” (senior-most teacher in each school).
Column total = 100.

The JJSS survey suggests that little has been done to make up for the Covid-19 setbacks. As Table 5 shows, 85% of the respondent teachers reported that their schools did not extend school hours. Only one fifth of primary schools and one third of upper-primary schools held extra classes outside school hours. Measures such as mobilization of extra teachers or volunteers and significant changes in pedagogy to meet the demands of the crisis were not on the radar. Some other measures such as the distribution of special learning material, simplification of curriculum and bridge courses facilitated by NGOs were taken, but it is not clear how effective they were. For instance, bridge courses were often left incomplete. Moreover, many respondent teachers underscored that it was measures related to extra classes, remedial classes, and revision that would have helped students, without mentioning material distribution as useful measures.

Table 5: Post-Covid Remedial Measures

Proportion (%) of respondent teachers who said that the following measures had been taken in their school to help children who had forgotten how to read and write:	Primary School	Upper-primary School
Extension of school hours	15	15
Extra classes outside school hours	21	33
Distribution of special learning material	70	78
Simplification of curriculum	60	54
Bridge course	55	54
Shortening of holidays	25	20

Without adequate and effective remedial measures, primary and upper-primary schools in North Bihar are running as if no school closures and learning losses ever happened. This is extremely troubling, as these classes form the foundations of learning and not having a solid foundation affects the overall course of learning and educational experience of students. Lack of remedial measures will also exacerbate existing educational inequalities among students. While privileged students in urban schools have ways to supplement their schooling, marginalized students in rural areas lack this opportunity and pay an unequal price for a situation beyond their control.



Figure 3: Some students playing during post-school hours
(PC: Shashank Sinha and Harsh Raj)

Schools Without Infrastructure



One of the most severe issues found in schools in North Bihar is the lack of infrastructure, especially basic amenities. Fieldnotes about one primary school in Araria describe the situation bluntly but aptly: “No furniture, less classrooms, no playground. Some buildings being made from SMC funds were left incomplete. No library.” Upper-primary schools fare slightly better but are far from ideal. Table 6 summarizes the condition of basic facilities in the sample schools, as observed by the survey teams. We briefly discuss some of the more serious defects below.

Boundary walls: A majority (62%) of primary schools in the sample, and 19% of upper-primary schools, did not have a boundary wall. Without boundary walls, schools are exposed to vandalism, stray animals, unruly visitors, and free exit of children.

Playgrounds: Only two in five primary and one in five upper-primary schools have playgrounds that could be described as in “good” condition. In most schools, playgrounds are either non-existent or in bad shape because of lack of boundary wall and other maintenance issues. As field notes from the survey team highlight, without playgrounds “the holistic development of the children gets hampered due to their inability to play freely.”

Toilets: Schools in North Bihar are not open-defecation free – far from it. Over one fifth of primary schools and one sixth of upper-primary schools do not have toilets. Among those that do, a large majority have toilets that can be described as “so-so” or “poor”, with only a handful having “good” toilets. In some schools, there was just one toilet for both boys and girls, which was likely not being used by either. Lack of toilets can also be a source of tremendous discomfort for teachers, especially female teachers.

Water supply: Only 8% of primary schools had a “good” water supply. The condition was slightly better for upper-primary schools, but even there, less than half had a water supply that was described as “good” by the survey team. Without a good water supply, it is hard to maintain good hygiene and do basic maintenance at schools.

Table 6: Investigators' Assessment of the Condition of Basic Facilities

	Primary schools (%)			Upper-primary schools (%)		
	Good	Indifferent	Missing	Good	Indifferent	Missing
Water supply	8	80 ^a	12 ^b	42	56 ^a	2 ^b
Toilets	16	61	23	40	45	15
Clock	12	25	63	49	32	19
Electric fittings	22	50	28	41	59	0
Roof	55	35	10	66	32	2
Doors	58	32	10	73	27	0
Boundary wall	10	28	62	27	54	19
Cooking shed	11	82	7	40	53	7
Playground	2	70	28	22	61	17
Library	0	23	77	25	40	35

a: "So-so" or "poor".

b: Non-functional, or not available at all.

Apart from the shortage of basic amenities, there is an extreme shortage of classrooms, tables, and chairs. Often students make do by sitting outside in verandahs or corridors and on sacks or mats. The following case study of the Government Primary School Rishidev Tola in Araria, which has 150 students and runs from a hut, provides an important glimpse into the extreme shortage of infrastructure that plagues the schooling system in North Bihar.



Figure 4: Verandah classes at schools with inadequate infrastructure
(PC: Harsh Raj and Shashank Sinha)

A Straw-Bamboo Hut as a Primary School

Rishidev Tola, Plasmani is a small basti of people from the Rishidev caste in the Sikti block of Araria. The tola and the primary school situated here were extremely difficult to locate and reach. There is no motorable road, only sandy paths paved irregularly. The school sadly fits in with this deprived landscape. It consists of one classroom, which is just an impermanent hut made up of straw and bamboo. Multiple gaps are visible in this fragile structure with a thin roof. This primitive school 'building' with minimal teaching facilities (no blackboard, benches, tables) is responsible for the primary education of around 150 students who are enrolled here. During our visit, there were no students present, though the teacher and some locals insisted that attendance is usually high. It is hard to believe, however, that this classroom can accommodate 150 children.

The school infrastructure consists of a permanent cooking shed and two toilets, which were both locked. While the cooking shed seemed to be in a decent condition, the toilets - which we were informed were newly installed - seemed to be in dire need of maintenance. The cook told us that the midday meal is prepared daily, and students usually leave after lunch. There is no running electricity or water supply on campus. A cow was seen grazing in the school premises. It was difficult to distinguish the area belonging to the school from the rest of the village for lack of a boundary wall. The sun was shining brightly in this sandy landscape during our visit, which also raises the question of how students can study in such heat.

Overall, infrastructurally, this school was the worst among all those we surveyed. It exposes the sad extremities of public education in North Bihar. A school that exists but does not have even the barest of facilities required for quality education.

Rahul Malviya, Student Volunteer (NLSIU Bangalore)



Figure 5: Primary school at Rishidev Tola runs from a straw-bamboo hut
(PC: Priyansh Sinha and Rahul Malviya)

Schools Without Buildings



As per the RTE Act, there are certain infrastructural requirements that all government schools must fulfill. One of them is to have an all-weather building with an adequate number of classrooms, an office-cum-store-cum-headteacher's room, washrooms for girls and boys, a safe and adequate water facility for all children, a cooking shed, a playground, and a boundary wall. The JJSS survey finds that all schools in North Bihar fall short of these requirements, by a long margin in most cases.

One of the most shocking findings from the survey is that 9% of the sample schools (7 out of 81) have no building. These schools run from another government office or building, up to 5 km away from the community they are meant for. Due to the long distance, enrolment in these schools is usually quite low. Some of these schools had no teachers of their own – they depended on teachers from another school where they had been allotted a single room.

Our survey findings on missing school buildings are consistent with official state-level data. According to a recent RTI (filed in early 2023), 7% of all government schools in Bihar do not have buildings and exist in similar conditions; 120 of these schools are within and around Patna, the state capital. (Mishra, 2023) Despite major progress in school infrastructure around the country, these schools and students studying in them are still stuck in pre RTE Act times when schools functioned without buildings. This is a gross violation of children's right to education and a dismal indication of how Bihar's schooling system is unable to meet even the basic norms.



Figure 6: Open air classes are a regular in Bihar (PC: Priyansh Sinha and Rahul Malviya)

A Building-less Primary School

PS Rishidev Tola, Rampur is in the interiors of Araria district and falls under Rampur-Kodarkatti gram panchayat. We had great difficulty in finding the primary school as it does not have its own building. Instead, it functions from the building of another primary school. They both run together, with PS Rishidev Tola assigned two classrooms. When we reached it, we found no students in PS Rishidev Tola despite it being school hours on a weekday. Upon inquiry, the teacher told us that due to the death of the headmistress of PS Rishidev Tola, the school's functioning was delayed.

Due to a scarcity of land for construction near Rishidev Tola, the primary school was running about 4-5 kms away from the community it had been established for. Despite an enrolment of 132 students, only 30-40 of them turn up for classes regularly as informed by the teacher on duty. Locals informed us that attendance was actually much lower. The guardians are not comfortable with their young kids walking unsupervised on busy roads to reach the school. Infrastructurally the school has two classrooms, students from classes 1 to 3 are taught together in one room and those in classes 4 and 5 are taught in the other one.

The two classrooms barely had any benches, and the students sat on the floor during lessons. There is no separate water supply and students from Rishidev Tola rely on a handpump on the premises. There were no separate toilets, boundary wall, or electricity. All these drawbacks make this school one of the most under-equipped among those we surveyed.

Harsh Raj, Student Volunteer (NLSIU, Bangalore)

Missing the Potential of the Midday Meals



The National Food Security Act gives all children studying in government primary and upper-primary schools the right to a hot-cooked midday meal. A tasty, nutritious, shared meal at school can go a long way in improving nutrition, attendance, and solidarity among children. Despite its clear benefits, the midday meal (MDM) programme in North Bihar faces several problems. First, inadequacy of resources creeps into midday meals as well. About 20% of sampled schools (24% primary and 17% upper-primary) reported having inadequate funds to run the midday meal. Even though 95% of the schools reported that they are providing one egg per week per child, many respondent teachers complained that the egg allowance in the MDM budget was below market price. Additionally, several schools do not have a proper cooking shed or a clean water supply to ensure hygienic cooking.



Figure 7: Students enjoying a midday meal during a school-visit.
(PC: Priyansh Sinha and Rahul Malviya)

Second, there are two systems through which the MDM programme is run in Bihar's schools. Food is either cooked at the school or brought in by a local NGO. While it is not clear why NGOs are involved in the first place, the lack of a uniform system for cooking midday meals causes confusion. There have been numerous reports from Bihar where children have fallen sick after eating the midday meal (Jha, 2023). Last month, Bihar's Human Rights Commission issued a notice to the state's Education Department to ensure that midday meals are cooked properly (Hindu Bureau, 2023). But since many schools are supplied cooked food via local non-profits it becomes difficult to do quality control. On the other hand, many respondent teachers complained that the MDM programme was an added burden. They complained that it took their time away from teaching and wanted to be relieved from this responsibility. Unfortunately, none of the respondents mentioned the many upsides of a programme like MDM.

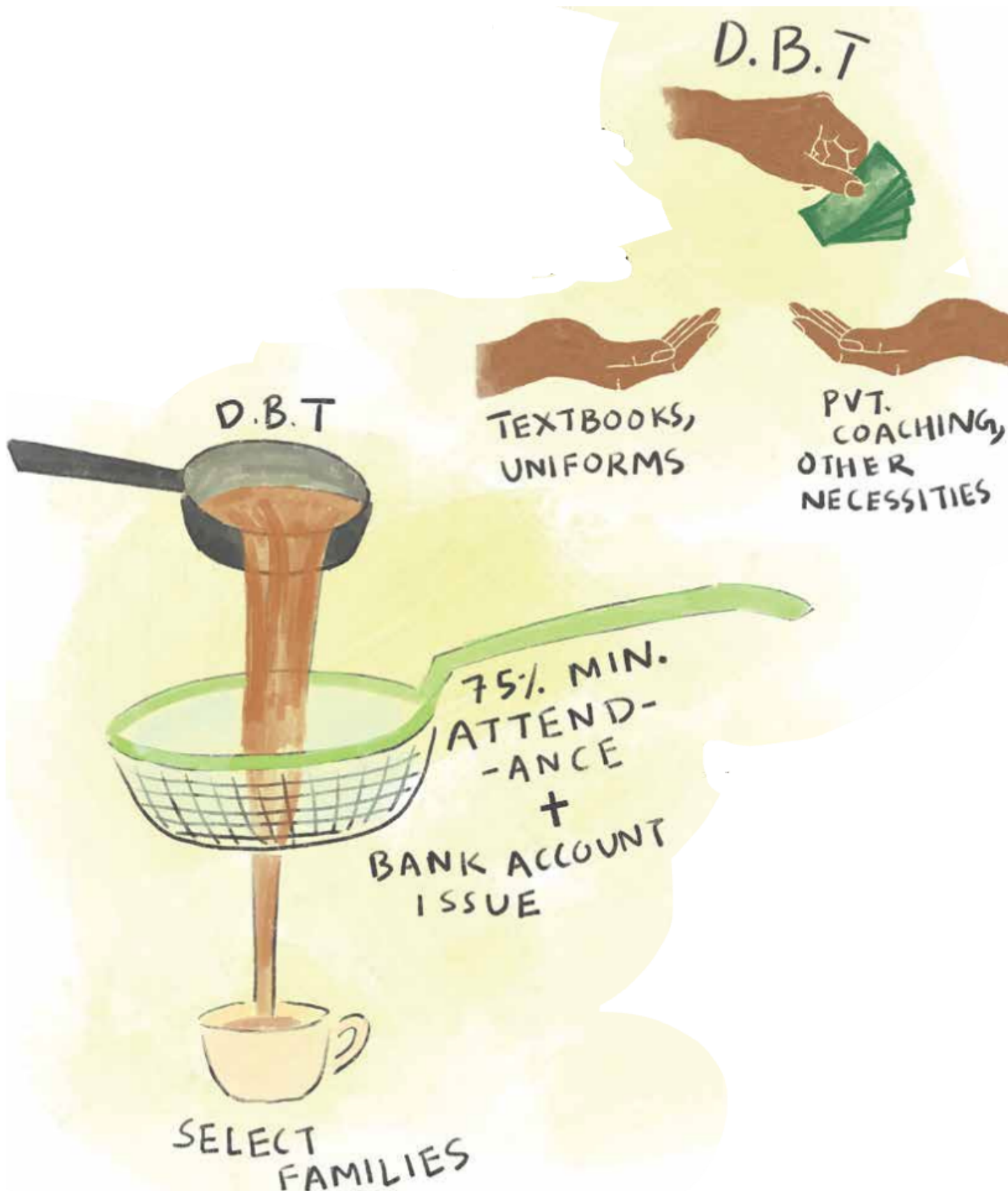
Finally, eggs in the MDM are coming under attack in some areas by local efforts to thrust vegetarianism on marginalized communities. Influenced by Brahmanical ideas of purity and pollution, some groups in rural Bihar instruct their followers to give up non-vegetarian food and keep fasts to attain purity. In at least three schools, the survey team found life-size framed photographs of leaders who are known to promote these values. Sometimes these photographs were also found in the kitchen shed. Fieldnotes from the survey team illustrate the situation:

“The most striking observation was that the students were not given eggs at all. The headmaster informed us that due to social pressure from the locals, egg was not provided as it was considered non-veg and impure.”



Figure 8: Lifesize photographs of local sadhus on school premises known to discourage eggs in MDMs (PC: Priyansh Sinha and Rahul Malviya)

Dangers of Direct Benefit Transfer



Until a few years ago, the Department of Education directly provided textbooks and uniforms to school children in Bihar (Kumar, 2022). However, there were serious supply-chain issues in this centralized distribution system, often resulting in long delays, e.g., books reaching schools mid-session. In 2017, with the push from the union government for so-called direct benefit transfer (DBT) in welfare programmes, Bihar replaced direct distribution of textbooks and uniforms with cash transfers. Under the DBT system, money is sent to children's bank accounts (or to their parent's accounts if need be) on the understanding that it is to be used for buying uniforms and textbooks.

This is an odd system, unique to Bihar it seems, for textbooks at least (Jharkhand has recently adopted DBT for uniforms). Its outcome is not hard to guess: in most schools, many children don't have a uniform or textbooks. In some schools, most children don't have textbooks. And sure enough, those without textbooks often come from disadvantaged communities. In short, the DBT system is a disaster, especially serious for textbooks.

There are two distinct reasons why children may be deprived of textbooks under the DBT system. First, DBT money may be used for something else. Children studying in government schools tend to come from poor families, and the DBT system imposes on them a cruel choice between buying textbooks and spending the money on basic necessities. Informal conversations with parents suggest that many of them are using DBT money for other purposes, including private tuition in some cases.

Second, DBT money does not always reach the children or their parents. The money is conditional on 75% school attendance, and also requires an Aadhaar-linked bank account. The attendance condition is perhaps not strictly enforced (and as mentioned earlier, attendance registers are inflated), but it is still a possible barrier. Some parents are not even aware that textbook money is conditional on 75% attendance. Incidentally, this is a violation of the RTE Act – school children have an unconditional right to textbooks.

Sometimes, DBT payments also fail due to Aadhaar-related problems. This can happen, for instance, due to discrepancies in a child's name between the Aadhaar card and school register or Know Your Customer (KYC) problems at the bank. Payment rejection problems in the DBT system are familiar to other welfare programmes (e.g., MGNREGA and pensions), and it is clear from the Bihar Government's own data that they affect the textbook scheme as well: according to the Medhasoft portal for school related DBT transactions in Bihar, more than 10,000 students' bank accounts have been rejected in the 11 survey blocks. Quite often, parents have no idea why payments are rejected, or how to solve the problem. There is no system in place to deal with these issues. And by the way, demanding Aadhaar from school children is a violation of Supreme Court orders on Aadhaar.

In the absence of DBT money, students were still trying hard to get textbooks and uniforms. We found that many children without textbooks were banking on private tuition to help them study. Some had borrowed from a senior or were sharing with their classmates. Uniforms, on the other hand, were more commonly spotted. Some students claimed that they were wearing their elder siblings' hand-me-down, while some claimed that despite no DBT, they had cajoled their parents to get them the uniform. But many were coming to school in home clothes.

DBT's failure in ensuring that all students have uniforms and textbooks has serious consequences. Not having a uniform while going to school can have psycho-social implications on students. The main purpose of uniforms is to hide visible signs of inequality among students – this purpose is roundly defeated when some students have a uniform and others not. Similarly, since our education system is largely textbook based, in a resource-starved context like rural Bihar, there would be little learning without them. As was stated by many teachers during the survey, without textbooks the Covid-19 lockdown was worse for their students because in the absence of physical classes and textbooks they were left clueless on 'what' to study on their own at home.

In follow-up telephonic conversations with 20 teachers from the sample schools, we found that almost all of them opposed the DBT system and advocated direct distribution with improved timeliness. As it happens, the Department of Education is now reverting to direct distribution for textbooks. However, DBT continues for uniforms.



**Figure 9: Students managing classes with barely any textbooks
(PC: Shashank Sinha and Harsh Raj)**

Foundational Literacy and Numeracy

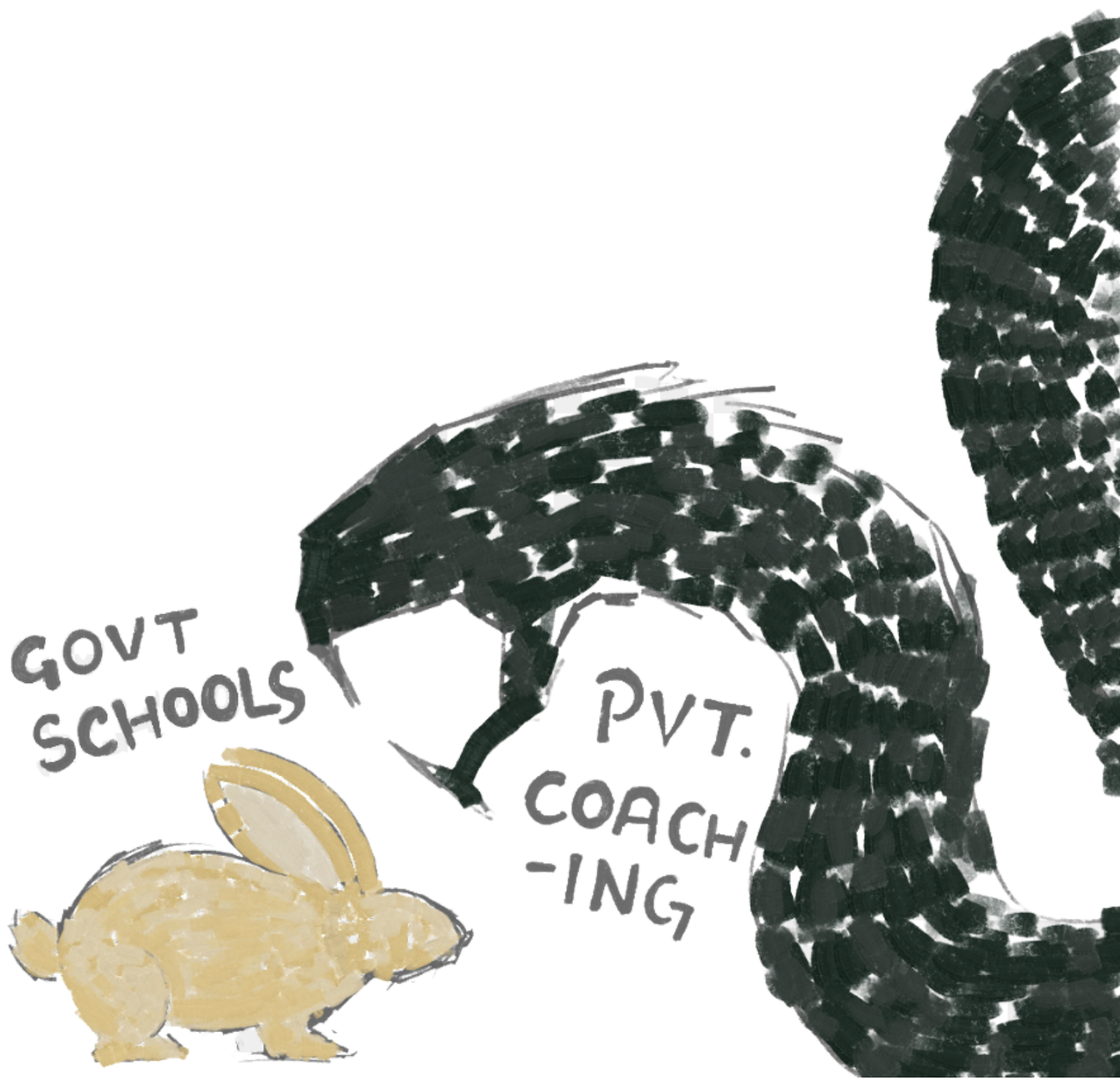
As a part of the National Education Policy 2020, the central government has initiated a set of new books for grades 1 – 3 as a part of their ‘FLN coursework’. These books are being promoted by the central government as a part of Mission 2027, by which year it aims to make all kids in class 3 or below learn basic arithmetic, reading, and writing. To achieve this, FLN books have been distributed by the Bihar government to each school. As per the survey, we found that 28% of the sample schools (35% primary and 22% upper-primary) had not been provided with the FLN books for the year. As for the schools where FLN was distributed, 70% of them found the books to be quite useful. There were also schools where the survey teams found FLN books still packed sealed in their cardboard boxes.

It has been found that since FLN textbooks reach the school via the local Block Resource Centre and not through DBT, in cases where schools did not have the standard textbooks, FLN books became the only ones available to the students. It remains to be seen whether they can make a real difference in a dysfunctional system.



Figure 10: Makeshift libraries (PC: Harsh Raj and Shashank Sinha)

Private Tuitions Can't Be The Answer



Given this sorry state of government schools, as has been highlighted before, many students rely on private tuition. In several schools, the survey team found that the students had left for private tuitions post lunch. In others, students came late to school because school timings clashed with those of a coaching centre. While private tuitions take place in a variety of establishments, most of them are humble setups in the villages or *bazaars*. Though small and spartan in infrastructure, private tuitions are very popular and have started acting as a replacement to a failing schooling system in rural North Bihar. The reliance on private tuition has increased so much that it is practically replacing all teaching learning in government schools. A nexus has been formed between dysfunctional government schools and private tuitions, where the role of the school has been reduced to merely providing a midday meal and arranging examinations.

However, private tuitions have several problems. First and foremost, they reinforce prior inequalities by transforming education into a commodity allocated on the basis of ability to pay. Extreme poverty and gender norms in this area determine the accessibility of private education. Children from privileged groups and boys are more likely to attend private tuition compared to children from disadvantaged backgrounds and girls. Second, private tuitions are devoid of regulation and accountability. They can operate at will without meeting any norms related to space, cleanliness, hygiene, a democratic work culture or other essential elements of a sound learning environment. Finally, private tuitions focus single-mindedly on exams and scores with little concern for the holistic development of children. Therefore, private tuitions cannot and should not become a replacement for functional schools.

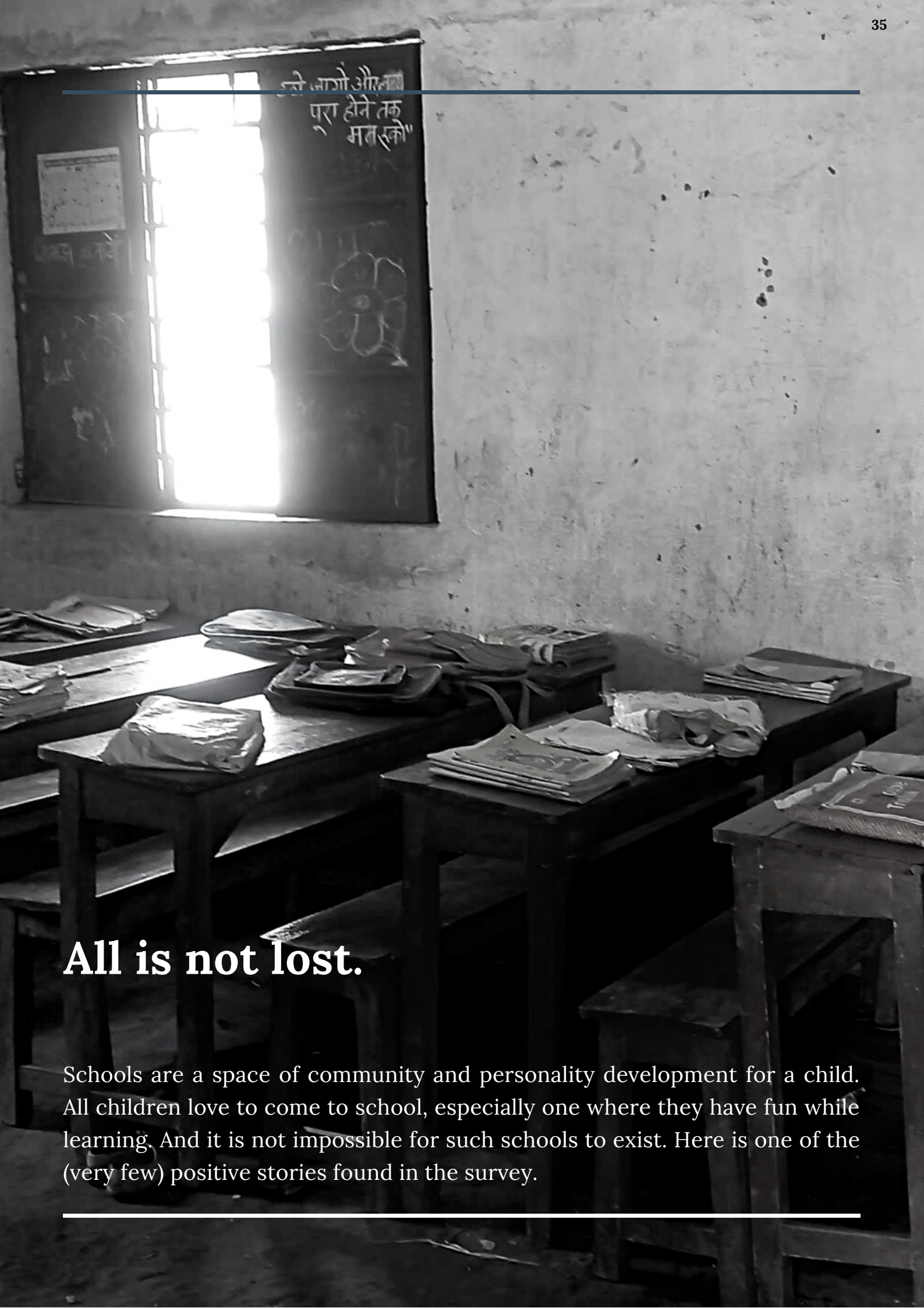


Figure 11: Unappealing schools translate into low attendance
(PC: Priyansh Sinha and Rahul Malviya)

Rampant violations of the Right to Education Act

As should be clear by now, most if not all government schools in the JJSS sample stand in violation of the RTE Act. Only 21% of them had a pupil-teacher ratio below 30, the prescribed maximum. Basic infrastructure is largely absent with none of the primary schools and only 22% of the upper-primary schools reporting having water and functional toilets. Additionally, a classroom for every teacher, a boundary wall, a playground, and a functional kitchen shed-- all mandatory facilities --were missing or in dilapidated condition in a large number of the sample schools. Shockingly, 9% had no building of their own. Finally, there is a 75% attendance conditionality on textbooks and uniforms, and many children don't have them even if they satisfy this condition - again violating the RTE Act.

By violating the norms of the RTE Act, these schools are violating a fundamental right of the children of Bihar. By letting public schools run in such dire conditions, the state government is snatching away the chances of its population to fight and climb out of marginality, poverty, and vulnerability. No wonder then, the state of schools studied in this survey is bordering on extinction. The biggest indicator of this is the extremely low attendance figures. As claimed by multiple teachers, it is becoming clear that children and parents are looking at government schools as a place for an afternoon meal and yearly examinations. For formal learning, they are relying on private tuitions. But given that private tuition, coaching centres, and commercialization of education are full of issues related to accessibility, accountability, equity, and quality, it is the children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, who are paying the heavy price of violation of RtE, looming extinction of public schools, and the problematic takeover by private education.



All is not lost.

Schools are a space of community and personality development for a child. All children love to come to school, especially one where they have fun while learning. And it is not impossible for such schools to exist. Here is one of the (very few) positive stories found in the survey.

UMS Chargharia: A Beam of Hope

UMS Chargharia in Sikti, Araria was one of the best schools we visited during the survey. The school's infrastructure was excellent, and the school was very well managed. The walls had been painted recently and there were enough classrooms for the students. All the students present were sitting on tables and chairs, unlike the other schools where the younger students were made to sit on mats on the floor. Every classroom had working lights and fans. The boundary wall surrounded the whole school and was of sufficient height. There was proper availability of water through handpumps and taps. The cooking shed was also clean and well-maintained. The washrooms were open and good for use. Moreover, due to the presence of the boundary wall, the students were using the washrooms. The only thing missing was a library room. The library books were kept in the office and students could ask their teachers for them.

The school had a good pupil -teacher ratio, almost meeting the RTE norms. Most of the students were wearing school uniforms and had brought their own books and copies. Teachers were present in every classroom and teaching-learning was going on. When we were surveying the school, we also observed the students being served the midday meal. The meals were prepared according to the prescribed menu and were being cooked at the school itself. The school also provided students with an egg every week according to the directions of the government.

UMS Chargharia also faces problems like other government schools, but it tries to come up with solutions and provide good education to all its students despite these problems. The teachers informed us that there is difficulty in attendance since children are often sent to work in the fields. To combat this, the teachers encourage the parents in SMC meetings to send their children to school regularly. They also cajole the parents to buy uniforms and books for their children and not use DBT money for other purposes. There were instances of things like inverters and wiring being stolen from the office in the past, but still, due to the efficient management of funds, the school was well maintained. UMS Chargharia is one of the closest we came to 'good' schooling and shows that despite adverse circumstances in Bihar, there exist schools which can provide quality education to students.

Priyansh Sinha, Student Volunteer (NLSIU Bangalore)

Like UMS Chargharia, a few other schools were well managed despite all the challenges. One thing common to all of them was dedicated teachers. Even in a broken system, a hard-working teacher can make all the difference. Without passionate and responsible teachers, meaningful learning cannot happen even in an infrastructurally perfect school. Therefore, the role of teachers emerged as a key factor that made these schools function well. Additionally, these schools had comparatively better infrastructure, with electric supply, well-maintained libraries, and tiles across the floors. These were schools where the students had comparatively better attendance. Ensuring good attendance is often an outcome of the children's and their parents' feelings towards and expectations from the school. A well-maintained school is bound to be taken seriously by the enrolled students and their parents. These positive examples underscore that there isn't something inherently defective about government schools in North Bihar. Passion and responsibility from teachers, government, and society for every child's education and wellbeing can make a huge difference in changing the sorry state of schools.



Figure 12: A teacher showing a school's library (PC: Harsh Raj and Shashank Sinha)

How do Bihar's schools fare in comparison to Jharkhand?

Gloom in the Classroom, a report based on a similar survey conducted by Gyan Vigyan Samiti Jharkhand (GVSJ), brought out the dismal state of primary and upper-primary schools in Jharkhand. (Gyan Vigyan Samiti Jharkhand, 2022) As can be seen in the comparative table below, schools in Bihar and Jharkhand are far from ideal. There are differences though in what is missing and present in the two states.

	Bihar	Jharkhand
PTR	21% schools maintain RTE norms	36% schools maintain RTE norms
Attendance	23% in primary and 20% in upper-primary	68% in primary and 58% in upper-primary
Covid learning losses and measures	Rampant learning losses, limited remedial measures, tuition gave support	Rampant learning losses, incomplete remedial measures
Infrastructure	Little furniture, basic necessities absent, vandalism	Inadequate infrastructure but responsible villagers
Gender gap in workforce	Above 40% female teachers in schools	21% in primary and 35% in upper primary female teachers
FLN	Not in 30% schools, useful when DBT fails	Distributed without training, not very useful
Midday Meals	Messy MDM, egg pricing mismatch, only 1 egg/week/child, push towards vegetarianism	Stabler MDM, eggs/week to be increased, more acceptance towards egg-eating in schools
Textbooks and uniforms	Largely missing, situation is critical	Present but inadequate as per enrollment in schools, must be improved
Building-less schools	9% of our sample	Not missing, but schools are being merged
Private Tuitions	Rampant, replacing the idea of schooling	Rampant, replacing the idea of schooling
Toilets and open defecation	Toilets are not maintained, open defecation is the way to go	Toilets lack water, students do have a habit of using toilets if water is present
Single teacher schools	10% of the state	30% of the state (and sample)

Figure 9: Comparison between schools in Bihar and Jharkhand

Bihar fares even worse than Jharkhand on several counts: a worse pupil-teacher ratio; lower school attendance rates; dismal infrastructure; fewer eggs in the midday meal; missing textbooks and uniforms; unhygienic and ill-maintained toilets; and building-less schools! On the other hand, government schools in Jharkhand fare worse in terms of being a hub of single-teacher schools (nearly 30%); fewer female teachers in the workforce; and FLN being distributed without training. On most counts, of course, the situation is grim in both states. But it can be said that ever so slightly, primary, and upper-primary schools are doing better in Jharkhand than Bihar.



Figure 13: Shortage of tables and chairs within classrooms pushes students to their school verandahs (PC: Priyansh Sinha and Rahul Malviya)

समृद्ध जीवन

अच्छे विद्यालय

शिक्षा संसाधन

प्रतिबद्ध शिक्षक

अच्छी शिक्षा

किताबें

पुस्तकालय

शौचालय

खेलमैदान











मध्याह्न भोजन



Time to change the sorry state of the schooling system in North Bihar

Even as the handful of schools that are functioning well give hope, this survey presents an alarming picture of the schooling system in North Bihar. As the report cards below illustrate, in most if not all aspects, primary and upper-primary schools in this area fail to meet the bare minimum standards.

REPORT CARD: PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Proportion (%) of Primary Schools With:			
Pupil Attendance Above 50%		Atleast Five Classrooms	
PTR Below 30		Toilets in Good Condition	
Adequate Funds for Midday Meals		Playground	
At least Five Teachers		Electricity, Water & Toilets (all 3)	
At least Two Female Teachers		Library	











Yes

No

As can be seen in the report card above, primary schools in North Bihar have very few students in attendance. There is a severe teacher shortage, with only 39% of schools maintaining the PTR norms prescribed in the Right to Education Act.

Only 12.5% of primary schools have at least five teachers – one for each class. In terms of infrastructure, these schools also score quite badly. Not a single primary school in the sample had functional electricity, water supply and toilets! Only 35% had five classrooms, the rest had to practice multi-grade teaching which is known to reduce learning outcomes. No primary school had a good library and only 2% had a good playground. Three-fourths claimed to have adequate funds for the midday meal.

REPORT CARD: UPPER-PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Proportion (%) of Primary Schools With:			
Pupil Attendance Above 50%		Atleast Eight Classrooms	
PTR Below 30		Toilets in Good Condition	
Adequate Funds for Midday Meals		Playground	
Atleast Eight Teachers		Electricity, Water & Toilets (all 3)	
At least Two Female Teachers		Library	

Yes

No

The upper-primary schools are in a somewhat better state. Their pupil attendance rates are no better, with only 7% of schools claiming a pupil attendance above 50%. But more than half the upper-primary schools in the sample had at least 8 teachers, and about 81% claimed that they had adequate midday meal funds. Infrastructurally, these schools are better off compared with their primary counterparts with 25% having a good library, 22% a good playground, and 22% functional electricity, water supply, and toilets (all three). Still, very few if any meet the minimum RTE norms.

As the report cards suggest, schools in this area have become yet another avenue of struggle and scramble for millions of young children. As if the persistent lack of teachers, infrastructure, and governmental and societal commitment were not enough, policies like DBT and shoddy efforts during and after Covid-related school closures are further adding salt to the injury.

Regrettably, there is no public discussion of the schooling crisis in Bihar. This is because this crisis affects the disadvantaged groups the most. Those with means have placed their trust in private schools, coaching centres, and tuition and thus have little interest in improving public schools. The administrators seem to be more concerned with transfers, procurement, and record-keeping than with the state and quality of schooling. As for policymakers and political leaders, elementary education is not a hot topic. Therefore, the crisis continues.

Putting an end to this crisis requires urgent and multidimensional efforts. The RTE, both in spirit and specifics, can serve as an important guideline for such efforts. Its overall emphasis on the creation of a wholesome and empowering school environment for every child should be the end goal of schooling in North Bihar. The Act includes many useful provisions for this purpose, related not only to school facilities but also to minimum norms, classroom hours, curriculum development, instruction languages, constitutional values, teaching methods, physical safety, teacher training, participatory management, parent-teacher cooperation, social equity, preschool education, and private tuitions. Understanding and applying these provisions could be of great help in making the right to education a reality, notably by making parents more demanding and the system more accountable.



Figure 12: A primary school with children sitting without uniforms.
(PC: Priyansh Sinha and Harsh Raj)

While there is a need for comprehensive action over time, the survey points to two priority concerns. First, there is an urgent need to understand and address the problem of abysmal school attendance. We have discussed possible reasons for shocking levels of pupil absenteeism (about 80% on an average day), but they need further probing. This would require extensive discussions with parents and children. Among other possible responses, providing eggs every day instead of once a week with the midday meal might help. It would be a good thing to do in any case, as many other states have already recognised.

Second, the DBT fiasco calls for an immediate reversal of this odd and unfair policy. This is not the right way of addressing issues of inefficient distribution of textbooks and uniforms. Timely distribution is not rocket science - many other states (including all the South Indian states) have shown how it can be done. With adequate planning, books and uniforms can easily reach the schools at the beginning of the school year.

Ending North Bihar's schooling crisis requires collective efforts and responsibility. While the state government and administration have the primary responsibility to fix the system, social movements and society at large also need to play their part actively. Taking inspiration from Dr. Ambedkar's slogan "Educate, agitate, organize", it's time to collectively agitate and organize for the education of every child in North Bihar.

Appendix

Table A1: Percentage Distribution of Schools by Number of Teachers

Number of teachers	Primary schools (%)	Upper-primary schools (%)	All sample schools (%)
2	20	0	10
3	25	2	14
4	43	5	23
5 – 8	12	44	28
9-12	0	32	16
13-18	0	17	9

Column total= 100

Table A2: Percentage Distribution of Schools by Number of Teachers

Number of Pupils	Primary schools (%)	Upper-primary schools (%)	All sample schools (%)
Less than 150	60	0	30
150 – 300	32	22	27
301 - 500	8	43	26
501 – 800	0	25	12
More than 800	0	10	5

Column total= 100

Appendix

Table A3: Percentage Distribution of Teachers by Gender

	Primary-school teachers (%)	Upper-primary school teachers (%)
Males	57	58
Females	43	42

Table A4: Social composition of sample teachers and Bihar population (%)

	Teachers (primary and upper-primary schools)	Bihar population ^a
SC	17	16
ST	3	1
OBC	43	50
Muslim	19	17
General	18	16

* Census of India 2011 for SC and ST. Second India Human Development Survey (2011-12) for OBC and Muslim. The last figure was inferred by subtraction from 100%. Column totals = 100.

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