

Gloom in the Classroom

The Schooling Crisis in Jharkhand

Gyan Vigyan Samiti Jharkhand



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This report presents the main findings of a survey of 138 primary and upper-primary schools in Jharkhand, conducted in September-October 2022 by Gyan Vigyan Samiti Jharkhand (GVSJ). The schooling system in Jharkhand, weak to start with, suffered a heavy blow during the Covid-19 crisis. Recent recovery measures are grossly inadequate. Safeguarding the wellbeing and rights of Jharkhandi children calls for a major investment in the schooling system. Most schools are yet to comply with the Right to Education Act 2009.

This report was prepared by Paran Amitava and Jean Drèze on behalf of Gyan Vigyan Samiti Jharkhand, the Jharkhand chapter of Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti (BGVS). The survey was conducted by GVSJ volunteers. Heartfelt thanks to Muskan Soni and Mohammad Waqas for design and translation, kindly supported by the National Coalition on the Education Emergency.

Survey Highlights

The schooling system in Jharkhand is shot through with teacher shortages. Only 53% of primary schools and **19% of upper-primary schools in the sample had a pupil-teacher ratio below 30**, as prescribed under the Right to Education Act.

Out of 138 schools in the sample, **20% had a single teacher**. In a majority of these schools, the single teacher is a male para-teacher. **Almost 90% of pupils in these single-teacher schools are Dalit or Adivasi children**.

Para-teachers account for a majority (55%) of teachers at the primary level, and 37% of teachers at the upper-primary level. **About 40% of primary schools in the sample are run entirely by para-teachers**.

In a majority of schools, **teachers felt that “most” pupils had forgotten how to read and write** by the time schools reopened in February 2022.

Pupil attendance on the day of the survey was just 68% in primary schools and **58% in upper-primary schools**.

Not a single school in the sample had functional toilets, electricity and water supply (all three).

Two thirds of primary schools in the sample had no boundary wall, **64% did not have a playground** and 37% had no library books.

A large majority (two thirds) of the teachers said that the school **did not have adequate funds for the midday meal** at the time of the survey.

Many schools (10% as per teachers' responses, more according to survey teams) are still **not serving eggs twice a week**, as prescribed.

In most of the sample schools, **little had been done to help children who had forgotten how to read and write** during the Covid-19 crisis, except for the distribution of “foundational literacy and numeracy” (FLN) material.

Source: GVSJ survey of 138 primary and upper-primary schools in 16 districts of Jharkhand, September-October 2022. The sample schools were selected at random within the 26 sample blocks, among those where at least 50% of pupils are SC/ST.

The Schooling Crisis in Jharkhand

Jharkhand has one of the weakest schooling systems in India. Most schools are yet to comply with the minimum norms prescribed by the Right to Education Act 2009. In particular, there are serious shortages of teachers and basic infrastructure in many schools, especially those accessible to Dalit and Adivasi children. The work culture in the schooling system also leaves much to be desired. Jharkhand is one among a few states (also including Bihar, Assam and Uttar Pradesh) where half of all children in the age group of 8-11 years were unable to read a simple paragraph in 2011, according to Annual Survey of Education Report (ASER) data.

In 2020-21, this fragile schooling system was hit hard by the Covid-19 crisis. Primary and upper-primary schools were closed for two years – longer than anywhere else in the world. School premises, rudimentary as they were to start with, deteriorated for lack of maintenance. A small minority of privileged children were able to continue studying online, but the rest were left to their own devices. Large numbers of children forgot much of what they had learnt earlier (Bakhla et al., 2021). Soon after schools finally reopened in early 2022, these children were catapulted three years ahead of the grade they were enrolled in before the Covid-19 crisis, without any serious measures being taken to enable them to catch up. Once again, underprivileged children were left to fend for themselves.

To assess the situation, Gyan Vigyan Samiti Jharkhand (GVSJ) conducted a survey of primary and upper-primary schools in Jharkhand in September-October 2022. This report presents the main findings of the survey.

The Survey

The GVSJ survey focuses on government primary and upper-primary schools where at least 50% of the children enrolled come from scheduled caste (SC) or scheduled tribe (ST) families. It took place in 26 blocks spread over 16 districts – blocks where GVSJ volunteers were available to conduct the survey.¹ In each block, we made a target list of eight schools (with an equal number of primary and upper-primary schools), selected at random among those with at least 50% SC/ST enrolment. GVSJ volunteers surveyed schools from that list, in serial order, according to their time availability. A total of 138 schools were surveyed, almost equally divided between primary and upper-primary schools (see Table 1).² This sample is not representative of all government schools in Jharkhand, but it is likely to be approximately representative of government schools accessible to deprived communities in the survey districts, or for that matter in Jharkhand since the state of government schools is quite similar across the state. Basic comparisons between the sample schools and all-Jharkhand data from the Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE) did not uncover any evidence of serious bias in the GVSJ sample.

The survey teams reached the sample schools without prior announcement during school hours. They conducted a detailed interview with the senior-most teacher (hereafter “respondent teacher”). The interview covered topics such as the condition of the school infrastructure, teaching methods, midday meals, obstacles to better education quality, remedial measures initiated to help children affected by the Covid-19 crisis, and teachers’ views on various matters. Although largely quantitative, the questionnaire included many qualitative questions and a designated section where investigators were able to record their own observations about the school. The survey teams also examined some school records, including enrolment and attendance data.

(1) The 16 survey districts were: Bokaro, Chatra, Deoghar, Dhanbad, Dumka, Garhwa, Godda, Giridih, Khunti, Koderma, Latehar, Lohardaga, Palamu, Ramgarh, Saraikela and West Singhbhum.

(2) Primary and upper-primary schools cover Classes 1-5 and Classes 1-8 respectively. The ratio of primary to upper-primary schools is around 1:1 in our sample, but more like 2:1 for all government schools in Jharkhand. In most of the tables, we present separate figures for primary and upper-primary schools.

Table 1: The Sample Schools

	Primary Schools	Upper-primary Schools
Number of sample schools	72	66
Average number of children enrolled	54	210
Average number of classrooms	2	5
Average number of teachers	1.9	4.7
Average pupil/teacher ratio	33	48

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



A Deficient Schooling System

The survey uncovered two distinct sets of problems in Jharkhand's schooling system: chronic deficiencies that pre-date the Covid-19 crisis, and more recent problems created by this crisis. This section focuses on the chronic deficiencies, starting with a severe shortage of teachers, classrooms and facilities.

Teacher Shortage

The settlement pattern in rural Jharkhand poses a special challenge for the schooling system: the population is often spread over numerous small habitations scattered over wide areas. Since primary schools are best located close to children's houses (this is also a legal obligation under the Right to Education Act), this means that Jharkhand has a large number of small schools. The typical primary school in rural Jharkhand has just two classrooms and one or two teachers. Even if the number of pupils is not large, as is often the case, it is naturally difficult to provide quality education when one or two teachers have to look after five different grades aside from administrative duties.

The settlement pattern, however, is not the only reason for teacher shortages. This can be seen from the fact that even in upper-primary schools, which tend to be larger, there is a serious shortage of teachers. In fact, in our sample, the pupil-teacher ratio (PTR) is higher in upper-primary schools than in primary schools.

Tables 2-4 present the distribution of sample schools by number of pupils, number of teachers and pupil-teacher ratio. Under the Right to Education Act, the PTR must not exceed 30 in any school at the primary or upper-primary level.³ **About half of the primary schools and 80% of the upper-primary schools in our sample violate this basic norm.** Nearly 40% of upper-primary schools (and 18% of the primary schools) have a PTR above 50, making effective teaching virtually impossible. This finding is consistent with earlier research, suggesting that Jharkhand has the worst teacher shortages among all major Indian states.⁴

(3) The maximum is actually 35 for Classes 6-8, but for those classes there are also norms for subject-specific teachers (e.g. for Mathematics, Languages and Social Studies), grossly violated in most of the upper-primary schools we surveyed. For primary schools with more than 200 pupils, the maximum PTR is 40.

(4) Datta and Kingdon (2021). The authors find that the true PTR "is much lower than 30 in all states except Jharkhand" (p. 6). The true PTR refers to PTR net of fake enrolment, as estimated by the authors.

Table 2: Percentage Distribution of Schools by Number of Teachers

Number of teachers	Primary Schools (%)	Upper-primary schools (%)	All sample schools (%)
1	35	4	20
2	53	14	34
3 - 5	12	50	30
More than 5	0	32	16

Column totals = 100.

Table 3: Percentage Distribution of Schools by Number of Pupils

Number of Students	Primary Schools (%)	Upper-primary schools (%)	All sample schools (%)
Less than 30	16	3	10
30 - 50	36	5	18
50 - 100	46	15	31
100 - 200	2	35	19
More than 200	0	42	22

Column totals = 100.

Table 4: Percentage Distribution of Schools by Pupil-Teacher Ratio

Pupil-teacher ratio	Primary Schools (%)	Upper-primary schools (%)	All sample schools (%)
Less than 30	53	19	36
30 - 40	21	21	21
40 - 50	8	23	15
More than 50	18	37	28

Column totals = 100.



Shortage of teachers was one of the most frequent and emphatic complaints expressed by the respondent teachers. In many schools, one teacher is occupied most of the time with record-keeping and other non-teaching duties (at the time of the survey, for instance, work related to caste certificates for SC/ST children was absorbing a lot of teacher time). That leaves very few teachers for educational activities. In primary schools, it is very common for a single “active teacher” to take care of all the children by herding them into one classroom, or going back and forth between two classrooms. In these circumstances, he or she is more like a child-minder than a real teacher.

According to the Right to Education Act, all schools should have at least two teachers, yet a shocking 35% of primary schools in our sample (20% of all schools) had a single teacher. A majority of single-teacher schools are run by para-teachers, all of them men except one. They have 51 children enrolled on average. Most of the pupils (87%) in these schools are Dalit or Adivasi children. **The state of single-teacher schools is awful** – see Box 1.

BOX 1

State of Single-Teacher Schools

Village & District	Observations of the survey team
Koday Dih (Giridih)	This school has 78 students but only one teacher. He seats the students in two rooms and shuttles back and forth. When he's busy in non-educational work, students just while away time.
Sirsiya (Giridih)	Despite being a middle school with 110 students, there is only one teacher. The teacher is unable to give time to the students properly.
Nauka (Garhwa)	This school had 24 students enrolled but only 18 were present. The premises are not clean. There is no playground. The students do not get eggs. They have not been given uniform and no scholarship money has been sent to their bank accounts. Everything is happening according to the teacher, nothing by the rules.
Kusumba (Dumka)	Having only a single teacher in school is no good. All students from different classes are asked to sit together and it is not a good way to teach them.
Dhanbasha (Dumka)	This school is very remote inside a jungle. There is no approach road. The villagers have made a trail through the jungle to move around. The conditions of the school are not great. The students sit on the ground since there are no durries. They should have two teachers but there is just one para-teacher who is here as an administrator.
Kusumtola (Palamu)	There is a shortage of classrooms in the school. All students sit together in one room. Many of them are Adivasi students from poor families. The single teacher is facing many issues. To establish an educational environment in the school a new teacher must be appointed, and space must be made for a playground.
Harilakol (Dhanbad)	Due to having a single teacher in the school, if the teacher leaves, the school must be shut down.
Arki (Khunti)	There is a lack of discipline among the students and having only one teacher in the school creates an environment for them to get unruly.
Kendu (Chatra)	This school has only one teacher, who is a para-teacher. Apart from teaching, the teacher has many responsibilities and is constantly called by the BRC.
Pancha (Ramgarh)	Single teacher school which becomes a big issue. Constantly involved in non-educational duties.

Note: This is a partial list of single-teacher schools. Very similar observations were reported in other single-teacher schools as well.

The shortage of teachers is amplified by another special feature of the schooling system in Jharkhand: a high proportion of para-teachers (as opposed to permanent teachers). Para-teachers account for a majority (55%) of teachers at the primary level, and 37% of teachers at the upper-primary level (Table 5).⁵ Further, 40% of the primary schools in our sample had no permanent teachers at all – they were entirely run by para-teachers. On this count, again, Jharkhand stands out among all Indian states, by a long margin.⁶

Para-teachers have lower qualifications and less training than regular teachers, and it is doubtful that they are more accountable. Also, this split teaching cadre, where para-teachers have much lower salaries and less regular pay, is not particularly conducive to mutual cooperation.

Another shortcoming of the teaching cadre in Jharkhand is the low proportion of female teachers: barely one fifth of all teachers in primary schools and one third in upper-primary schools, in the GVSJ sample (Table 5).⁷ Perhaps female teachers prefer upper-primary schools because they feel safer there, and the administration accommodates this preference to some extent. Whatever the reason, we found an acute shortage of female teachers in primary schools, and even in upper-primary schools their presence is very modest.

On a slightly more positive note, the social composition of the teaching cadre in Jharkhand is possibly more diverse than in many other states. By and large, it seems to mirror the composition of the population as a whole, whether we focus on permanent teachers or para-teachers (see Table 6).⁸ This is certainly a positive feature of government schools compared with private schools: according to UDISE data, a majority (60%) of teachers in recognised, unaided private schools in Jharkhand belong to the “general” category, and only 2% are SC teachers. However, bearing in mind that pupils in government schools tend to come from disadvantaged communities, one could argue for an even better representation of these communities in the teaching cadre.⁹ In Adivasi areas, for instance, there is a case for most teachers being local Adivasis, conversant with the local language and culture.

(5) UDISE data suggest an even higher proportion of para-teachers in Jharkhand as a whole: 77% of all teachers in primary schools and 54% in upper-primary schools (among those run by the Department of Education).

(6) See Datta and Kingdon (2021), Table 7. Jharkhand is the only major state where a majority of teachers are para-teachers.

(7) In Jharkhand as a whole, the proportion of female teachers in primary and upper-primary schools run by the Department of Education is around 27%, according to UDISE data.

(8) This point is corroborated by UDISE data for Jharkhand.

(9) According to UDISE data, only 12% of pupils at the primary and upper-primary levels in Jharkhand belong to the “general” category.

Table 5: Distribution of Teachers by Gender and Appointment Type

	Primary-school teachers (%)			Upper-primary school teachers (%)		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Permanent	37	8	45	40	23	63
Para	42	13	55	25	13	37
Total	79	21	100	65	35	100

Table 6: Social composition of sample teachers and Jharkhand population (%)

	Teachers (primary and upper-primary schools)			Jharkhand Population ^a
	Permanent teachers	Para-teachers	All teachers	
SC	11	13	12	12
ST	23	29	25	26
OBC	38	38	38	40
General	28	20	25	22

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

Infrastructural Deficiencies

In 1996, the Public Report on Basic Education (PROBE) survey found that 42% of government primary schools in four large north Indian states (including undivided Bihar) did not even have two pacca classrooms. Ten years later, this figure had come down, but it was still as high as 27%.¹⁰ The school infrastructure has improved a lot since then: most schools in Jharkhand today have a pacca building with at least two classrooms as well as an office, toilets and a cooking shed. A closer look, however, reveals that the condition of school premises is very poor and that there are still glaring gaps in school facilities. To illustrate, not one school in the GVSJ sample had functional toilets, electricity and water supply (all three) – facilities that ought to be available in every school by now.

Table 7 summarises the condition of basic facilities in the sample schools, as observed by the survey teams. Ideally, all these facilities should be in “good” condition in most of the schools, but in fact, multiple defects were found in all the schools. Some of the more serious defects are briefly discussed below.

Roofs: In almost half of the sample schools, the roof was not in good condition at the time of the survey. Some roofs are cracked or even in danger of falling. More frequently, there is seepage in the classrooms, making them unpleasant or unfit for study during the monsoon.

“There is water seepage from the ceiling in one of the two classrooms. Students from KG to Class 5 all sit in the same classroom.” (Bairia, Palamu district)

Boundary walls: Boundary walls are essential for the safety of children as well as for the tidiness of a school. Without a boundary wall, it is common for animals or drunkards to stray into the premises. A shocking 64% of primary schools and 39% of upper-primary schools have no boundary wall.

“Due to a lack of a boundary wall, animals keep entering the school premises. Sometimes wild elephants even come in. This causes some danger to the students during school hours.” (Bogai, Ramgarh district)

(10) See The PROBE Team (1999), pp. 40–41, and De et al. (2011), p. 2.

Table 7: Investigators' Assessment of the Condition of Basic Facilities in the Sample Schools

	Primary schools (%)			Upper-primary schools (%)		
	Good	Indifferent ^a	Missing ^b	Good	Indifferent ^a	Missing ^b
Water Supply	49	36	15	41	44	15
Toilets	41	44	15	43	52	5
Clock	50	25	25	68	26	6
Electrical fittings	46	38	16	68	27	5
Roof	69	29	2	53	40	7
Doors	76	21	3	72	25	3
Boundary wall	9	27	64	30	31	39
Cooking shed	48	31	21	50	35	15
Playground	3	33	64	11	44	45
Library	44	19	37	44	33	23

(a) "So-so" or "poor".

(b) Non-functional, or not available at all.

Playgrounds: Partly for lack of boundary walls, a majority of the sample schools had no playground. How can children have a happy time at school without a playground?

“The school has no playground or boundary wall. Kids don't have a space to play and stray animals keep entering the school premises.” (Sarahdih, Garhwa district)

Water supply: Only half of the sample schools had a satisfactory water supply, and 15% had no water supply at all within the premises. Where water is short, it becomes difficult to maintain toilets, ensure good hygiene, and run the kitchen.

*“Water supply is from a handpump which does not work most of the time. Toilets are dysfunctional and there is no boundary wall or playground.”
(Majdiha, Dumka district)*

Toilets: According to UDISE data, 98% of primary and upper-primary schools in Jharkhand have functional toilets, and 97% have a separate functional toilet for girls. These official statistics are grossly misleading. In our sample, 15% of primary schools and 5% of upper-primary schools had no functional toilet at all. Only 40% or so, in both categories, had toilets deemed to be in “good” condition by the survey teams. In some schools, there are functional toilets but they are mostly locked and effectively reserved for teachers.

“The toilets had bushes growing inside and it felt like they had not been used since they had been constructed.” (Saruka, Deogarh district)

Electricity: Most of the schools had an electricity connection. In 46% of primary schools and close to 70% of upper primary schools, fittings were considered “good” by the survey team, suggesting substantial progress on this front. Many schools, however, continue to function without proper fans and lights due to stealing, vandalizing or lack of maintenance.

Maintenance: Many schools have a serious maintenance problem, reflected in shabby premises, broken fixtures and dysfunctional equipment. Some maintenance funds are available to the School Management Committees (SMCs), but it is not hard to guess that they are often misused. Even if they are well utilized, maintenance funds (just Rs 10,000 per year for a typical primary school) are insufficient to ensure that school premises are in good shape.

“The school building is in bad shape, and the students had to be shifted to another school. We need a school building, toilets, kitchen shed, and library.” (Nagina Singh Road, Giridih district)



Lack of Earnestness

The biggest lacuna in Jharkhand's schooling system may not be the shortage of teachers, classrooms or other facilities but the lack of earnestness. We use the term "lack of earnestness" to refer to a cluster of related problems, such as irresponsible administration, dull teaching methods and a lazy work culture. Here are some of the symptoms of lack of earnestness that emerged from the survey:

- Dysfunctional schools (where no educational activities worth the name are happening) are allowed to continue as they are for years on end – see Box 2 for an example.
- In many schools, uniforms or textbooks were yet to be distributed at the time of the survey (months into the school year), or had been distributed to some pupils but not others.
- Symbolic School Management Committee (SMC) and Parent-Teacher meetings are held but these bodies have little power or influence.
- School visits by district or block functionaries are also symbolic and mainly focused on record-keeping.
- Teachers' complaints (e.g. about missing facilities or staff shortages) remain unanswered.
- The salaries of para-teachers and midday meal cooks are routinely delayed for months. Some cooks had remained unpaid for more than 6 months at the time of the survey.
- Activity-based learning is virtually absent. Instead, children are expected to manage with copying, rote learning, solo exercises, unassisted peer learning and other uncreative methods

BOX 2

Ejamar: A Dysfunctional School

Ejamar is a Dalit village on the outskirts of the Manika Block headquarters in Latehar district, with some Adivasi households as well. The local school has 88 children enrolled and a single teacher. The teacher was in ICU at the time of the survey and had just been replaced by another teacher on deputation, who was quite clueless.

The school has two classrooms, both dark and dingy with broken walls and cracked flooring. It has an electricity connection, but all the bulbs and fans have been stolen. Next to this building was the older school building, abandoned and completely dilapidated. This abandoned building had not been broken down and was occupying the little space that could have served as a playground. There was no water supply, except for a handpump that gave brown water when it worked at all. The toilets were also dysfunctional, with bushes growing inside.

The cook told me that she had not been paid for six months despite cooking the midday meal every day. Since the kitchen has a broken ceiling and no water or gas connection, she cooks in the house next door. She manages the midday meal with whatever funds the teacher gives her. She frankly told me that the school does not give eggs to the children, and that even vegetables were not being served on a regular basis. The children also asserted that they had never eaten eggs at school.

During the Covid-19 crisis, the children of Ejamar were left to their own devices. Most of them said that they had forgotten how to read and write when they came back to school earlier this year. They complained that no teaching was happening in the school. The teacher just wrote something on the blackboard for them to copy. They did not understand much of it.

The children had no uniforms, and nor had any uniform money been sent to their bank accounts. They had no textbooks either. Some FLN material had reached the school, but it was still lying in a box.

All this is happening within walking distance of the Block headquarters and Block Resource Centre (BRC). It is all the more heart-breaking as the children themselves were all smiles and enthusiasm.

(Paran Amitava)



Ejamar, Manika Block

Why is there so much apathy and irresponsibility in the system? One plausible answer is that the main victims are children who belong to powerless sections of society. The system does not work so badly for privileged children, who study in expensive private schools. Education policy is made principally for these privileged children, as can be seen for instance from the nature of the curriculum, the content of textbooks, the fixation with online learning during the Covid-19 crisis, and the lack of supportive measures for disadvantaged children when schools reopened. Because privileged children are not doing so badly in the current state of affairs, there is little pressure for change.

It is not as if the government is incapable of running decent schools. Special schools like the Kendriya Vidyalayas, Navodaya Vidyalayas, Kasturba Gandhi Vidyalayas, and even residential schools for SC/ST children in Jharkhand (not to speak of Netarhat Residential School) tend to have much higher standards than ordinary government schools. There is no reason why similar standards cannot be achieved in all schools.



Fallout of the Covid-19 Crisis

Back to Square One

Primary and upper-primary schools in Jharkhand finally reopened in early 2022 (mostly in February), after a gap of two years. A few months before that, the School Children's Online and Offline Learning (SCHOOL) survey found evidence that large numbers of children in Jharkhand, especially among disadvantaged families, had lost their ability to read and write during the Covid-19 crisis (Bakhla et al., 2021). A similar finding emerges from the GVSJ survey: in both primary and upper-primary schools, a majority of respondent teachers felt that “most” of the children enrolled in Classes 3-5 in their school had forgotten how to read and write by the time schools reopened (see Table 8).

That must have been true of younger children as well, since they had learnt even less before the Covid-19 crisis. Thus, in early 2022, the entire primary cycle (Classes 1-5) in a majority of schools consisted mostly of children who were unable to read and write. This is a disastrous state of affairs, considering that literacy is not only a critical capability in its own right but also a powerful springboard of further learning. We can also think of this problem as one symptom of the much larger damage inflicted by the Covid-19 crisis on the all-round wellbeing of underprivileged children.

This crisis called for a major investment in school education in 2022-23. Well before the 2022-23 Budget was prepared in Jharkhand, states like Tamil Nadu had already shown the possibility of helping disadvantaged children in this situation, for instance by organising special tuitions outside school hours.¹¹ Efforts were made to persuade the Government of Jharkhand to initiate similar measures as well as a lasting upgrade of the schooling system. Unfortunately, the state government went back to “business as usual” when schools reopened.

(11) The Tamil Nadu initiative is known as Illam Thedi Kalvi (ITK). For further details, see Singh et al. (2022).

Table 8: Teachers' Perceptions of Children's Reading and Writing Abilities post-Covid

"When the school reopened in early 2022, did you find that some children in Classes 3-5 had forgotten how to read and write?"			
	Primary schools (%)	Upper-primary schools (%)	All sample schools (%)
Yes, most of them	55	52	53
Yes, many	20	20	20
Yes, some	18	24	21
Yes, just a few	7	3	5
No	0	1	1

Note: This is the assessment of "respondent teachers" (senior-most teacher in each school.)

Column totals = 100.

Limited Measures

When we asked respondent teachers whether any special measures had been taken in the school to help children who had suffered from the Covid-19 crisis, most of them said yes. On further probing, however, it turned out that these measures amounted to very little in most cases. Briefly, they were as follows (see also Table 9):¹²

- A majority of respondents said that “special learning material” had been distributed to children. However, this turned out to refer mainly to centrally-sponsored “foundational learning and numeracy” (FLN) material, prepared in pursuance of the National Education Policy 2020. Many teachers found this material useful, but strictly speaking, it had little to do with the Covid-19 crisis, or with the Jharkhand government.
- A substantial minority (37%) of respondents claimed that special measures included a “bridge course”. Sometimes this referred to extra classes being organised in partnership with NGOs or under CSR programmes. Sometimes it simply referred to the distribution of Gyan Setu textbooks, prepared before the Covid-19 crisis. They were often considered helpful, but this does not really qualify as a “bridge course”.
- About half of the respondents said that the curriculum had been simplified.

The following sort of measures, on the other hand, had evidently not been taken (despite claims to the contrary by a small minority of respondents): extension of school hours; arrangements for extra classes; shortening of holidays; mobilisation of extra teachers or volunteers; significant changes in pedagogy or curriculum (other than FLN).

In short, the only good news is that the FLN material seems to be potentially useful in this situation. For the rest, most schools are operating as if they had never been closed in the last 2-3 years.

(12) Most of the respondents also said that a house-to-house enrolment drive had taken place, but this is a routine (annual) exercise and does not count as a special measure.

Table 9: 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 schools	Upper-primary schools
Distribution of special learning material	70	74
Bridge course	36	40
Simplification of curriculum	56	59
Extensions of school hours	25	19
Extra classes outside school hours	19	22
Shortening of holidays	32	29

Abysmal Attendance

We have information on the number of children present in each school on the day of the survey, from two different sources: the school register, and the survey team's own estimate (normally based on a direct "headcount"). As it turns out, the team estimates suggest that attendance figures from the school registers are fairly accurate in most schools: a little exaggerated on average, but not much.

We can use these figures to calculate the attendance rate: the number of children present divided by number of children enrolled. In a well-functioning school system, the attendance rate should be close to 100%, and certainly higher than 90%. Instead, we find an average attendance rate of just 78% in primary schools and 65% in upper-primary schools, based on school registers. The attendance figures based on headcount, which are likely to be more accurate, are even lower: 68% and 58%, respectively (Table 10).

Absentee pupils may or may not be the same day after day. If they tend to be the same, this would mean that a large proportion of children (especially at the upper-primary level) are effectively excluded from the schooling system, despite being formally enrolled. Further scrutiny of school registers, over a period of time, would shed light on this matter.

None of this tells us whether low attendance is a fallout of the Covid-19 crisis or a chronic problem in Jharkhand. Quite likely, it was already a problem before Covid-19, but it is worse today. What is clear is that low attendance is another aspect of the schooling crisis in Jharkhand. It threatens to turn large numbers of children into de facto drop-outs.

Table 10: Attendance Rates in the Sample Schools on the Day of the Survey

		Primary schools	Upper-primary schools
Average number of children enrolled (A)		54	210
Average number of children present:	As per school register (B)	42	136
	As per survey team (C)	37	122
Attendance rate (%)	As per school register (B/A)	78	65
	As per survey team (C/A)	68	58
Proportion of schools with more than 80% pupil attendance (%)		28	12



Spartan Midday Meals

Spartan Midday Meals

A tasty and healthy midday meal can be of great help in improving school attendance as well as the nutrition of children. On both counts, serving an egg every day can go a long way. In the post-Covid period, there was every reason to revamp school meals and start serving eggs five or six days a week. That, incidentally, is a long-standing promise of the Jharkhand government. Instead, the survey found that schools were struggling to provide basic midday meals because of a lack of funds.

A large majority (two thirds) of the respondent teachers said that the school did not have adequate funds for the midday meal at the time of the survey. What most of them meant is that midday meal funds had not been received for months.¹³ This forced them to arrange the midday meal by taking credit from local shops or borrowing from other sources. It is not difficult to imagine the effect on the quality of midday meals.

"MDM funds have run out. The principal spends from her own pocket to keep the midday meal going. Kids are complaining that the meal is not good." (Karwakala, Garhwa district)

As far as eggs are concerned, the current policy is to include an egg in the school meal twice a week. Most respondent teachers (90%) said that eggs were being provided twice a week, but informal sideline discussions with parents or children often revealed that this was not the case. It seems to be quite common for eggs to be provided less than twice a week, and a significant minority (10%) of teachers admitted as much. Many schools seem to be using the egg money to buy pulses and vegetables when midday meal funds are delayed. In three schools, eggs were not provided at all.

(13) According to some teachers, the main issue is that schools used to receive MDM funds at the beginning of each quarter, but are now receiving them at the end of each quarter. Even when funds are available, restrictive cost norms (Rs 5 per child per day at the primary level, more or less unchanged in real terms in the last 10 years) make it difficult to provide more than a very basic meal to school children.

Teachers' Perspective

The survey included detailed discussions with teachers about their own views and concerns. Many of their complaints are easy to guess from what has been said earlier. Their top complaint (by far) is the shortage of teachers, which makes it very difficult for them to do a good job. As one might expect, they also have many complaints about the lack of basic facilities and infrastructure – water, electricity, playgrounds, boundary walls and more.

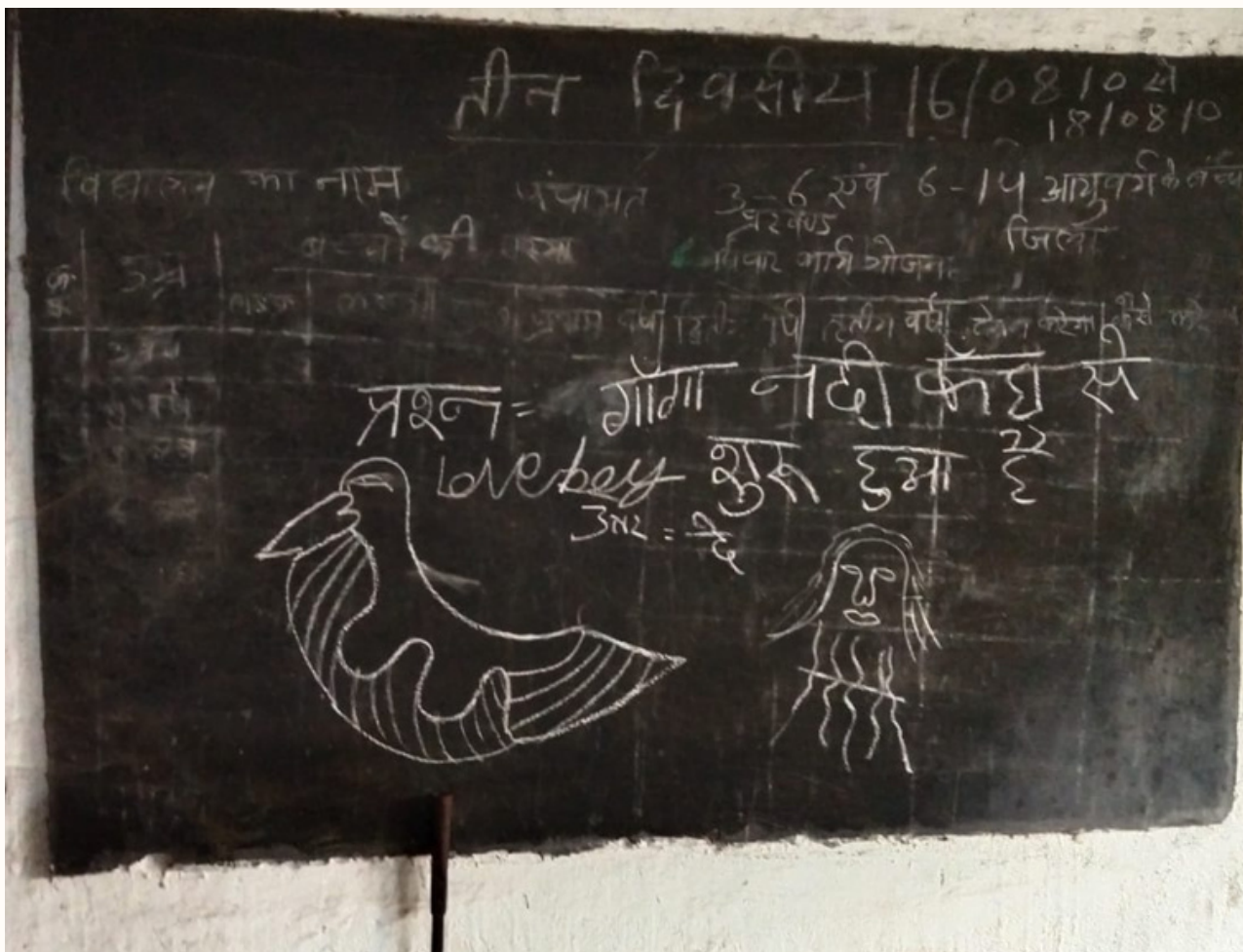
Another routine complaint of teachers is the burden of “non-teaching duties”: record-keeping, midday meal logistics, election-related work, training sessions, opening bank accounts for children and so on.¹⁴ The combined impact of teacher shortages and excessive non-teaching duties on educational activities is devastating. Officially, classroom hours are not supposed to be used for non-teaching duties, but this is a routine practice everywhere.

Many teachers are frustrated with the local administration and complain that no-one is responding to their demands, however urgent or elementary. Some teachers also complained of a lack of support or cooperation from parents. In some areas, they felt that parents lacked awareness of the value of education, or commitment to send their children to school every day. It was often hard to tell, however, whether this was a fair complaint or an excuse for the poor performance of the school.

(14) Quite likely, some of these duties violate the Right to Education Act. According to Section 27 of the Act, teachers are not to be “deployed for non-educational purposes” other than census work, disaster relief and election-related duties.

Many para-teachers are unhappy about the treatment they receive in comparison with permanent teachers. They do much the same work as permanent teachers, but their salaries are much lower (Rs 17,000 per month at the time of the survey, when permanent teachers earned up to Rs 80,000 per month). Permanent teachers are paid regularly every month, but the salaries of para-teachers are often delayed: a majority of them had not been paid for three months or more at the time of the survey. The fact that permanent teachers have better degrees and training does not justify these glaring inequalities.

Discussions with teachers often left a feeling of lack of engagement with education, as opposed to school management and child-minding. Many teachers are just “holding the fort” in a difficult situation. Even those who have a strong capacity to be good teachers (and there are quite a few) end up doing little educational work in this demotivating environment.



Silver Lining

The schooling system in Jharkhand is in bad shape, but some schools are good, even among ordinary government schools. The better schools show that it is possible to provide decent education even in Jharkhand's difficult environment. They also bring out the most important factor of success: teacher motivation. Schools with dedicated teachers stood out for their well-kept premises, friendly atmosphere, lively classrooms and confident children. The government middle school in Rankikalan is one example – see Box 3.

We came across a striking illustration of the role of teacher motivation in Murhu, an Adivasi area of Khunti district. Two schools (just a few kilometres apart) faced very similar circumstances, but one did very well while the other was barely functional. The attitude of teachers made all the difference – see Box 4. We note in passing that the dysfunctional school was managed by two upper-caste teachers who did not seem particularly concerned about the fate of their Adivasi pupils. The head teacher of the better school was a local Munda who had a good rapport with the children.

Not all teachers have a good potential, but many of them, quite likely, would prefer to take active part in a vibrant schooling system than to continue with a half-hearted fulfilment of their minimum obligations. It is the Department of Education's responsibility to create an environment that would make this possible.

One helpful development in this respect is the near disappearance of teacher absenteeism – a rampant problem not so long ago. In the sample schools, 95% of teachers appointed were present at the time of the investigators' unannounced visit. Quite likely, this had something to do with the recently-installed biometric attendance system. Teachers are in place, the main issue is to ensure that they make good use of their time.



The next step is to put an end to the practice of completing non-teaching duties during classroom hours. No doubt, teachers are being assigned excessive non-teaching duties (including some cumbersome record-keeping). But there can be no compromise on keeping classroom hours for teaching. The Right to Education Act clearly prescribes a minimum of 45 hours of work per week for teachers. It also has an implicit norm of at least four hours of classroom teaching per day in primary schools – 800 hours over 200 days, as a minimum. So, even on the basis of a six-day week, every teacher has more than 20 hours spare for non-teaching activities, outside classroom hours. If non-teaching duties are so demanding that they take more than 20 hours per week per teacher, that is something to be sorted out between the state government and teachers' unions – children should be not the victims. In fact, at this time of post-Covid schooling crisis, there is a case for more than four hours of classroom time per day, not less.

BOX 3

The Middle School in Rankikalan

It was a joy to visit the upper-primary school in Rankikalan (Latehar district). There were some passionate and hard-working teachers there, who had a good understanding of how to use Gyan Setu and FLN material to help disadvantaged students. The children also said that the teachers had tried to help them with zoom classes during the lockdown. They used to assemble and watch the class together using one phone. Only the older students, however, were able to do this.

I was taken around by two members of the Bal Sansad - both confident children from Adivasi families, happy to show me their well-functioning school. The school had a fine library with at least a hundred books, neatly arranged on tidy shelves.

There were at least six classrooms, most of them abuzz with learning activities. One classroom had a broken ceiling, making it unusable in the monsoon. The teachers told me that they had repeatedly appealed to the BRC to get this fixed, but it was deemed too expensive by the engineers. That classroom was being used to store rice.

The kitchen had two cooks, both unpaid for months. Neither the cooks nor the students were aware that eggs were supposed to be served twice a week. One of my two guides promptly said that she would bring this up at the next meeting of the School Management Committee, where she represents the Bal Sansad.

The enthusiasm of teachers and students was inspiring and gave me hope. The teachers said that the children had been very eager and studious after schools reopened earlier this year. They felt that this was because the children had been out of school for two years. But perhaps it was the teachers' own zeal that had made the children miss the school so much.

(Paran Amitava)



The School Library in Ranikalan

BOX 4

A Tale of Two Schools

The sharp contrast between two primary schools in Murhu (Khunti district) illustrates how teacher motivation can make a big difference. The two schools are barely 5 km apart and very similar in terms of size, norms, environment, infrastructure, teacher postings and social background of students – yet they function in remarkably different ways. Both had two teachers marooned in an old building with moss on the outer walls and just two dingy classrooms, in a remote area devoid of connectivity. But in one school, the teachers had risen to the occasion even as the other was barely functional.

School A was a tiny school with only 30 odd students, all Adivasis. The teachers had permanent posts and were both upper-caste men. The classrooms had no desks or lights but the teachers' office had a new table, a Godrej almirah and a fan – all bought from the SMC fund. The teachers said that the school had been painted recently, but massive stains on the walls made this hard to believe. There were barely 12-15 students in the school when we arrived, the others were allegedly busy with a local festival. The teachers claimed that eggs were being provided, but there were none in the kitchen and the expression on the cook's face suggested otherwise. The students recited two English poems for me but the teachers showed little interest in helping the children to learn.

School B had about 50 students, mostly Adivasis again. Here, one of the teachers was an Adivasi and the other one was OBC. Both teachers seemed sincere and they were busy teaching when we arrived. We even felt a little hesitant to interrupt, as the students were focused on their lessons. They kept studying quietly (maths and English) even after we started interviewing the teachers. The senior teacher was a local Munda who was able to converse with the children in their mother tongue, and the other teacher was doing his best to learn some Mundari. The teachers said that they had applied for a new classroom but were still waiting for clearance. They told us frankly that the school was serving eggs only once a week, and using the rest of the egg money to make up for the delayed midday meal funds. In this school, student attendance was good despite the “festival”!

(Paran Amitava)

Time to Act

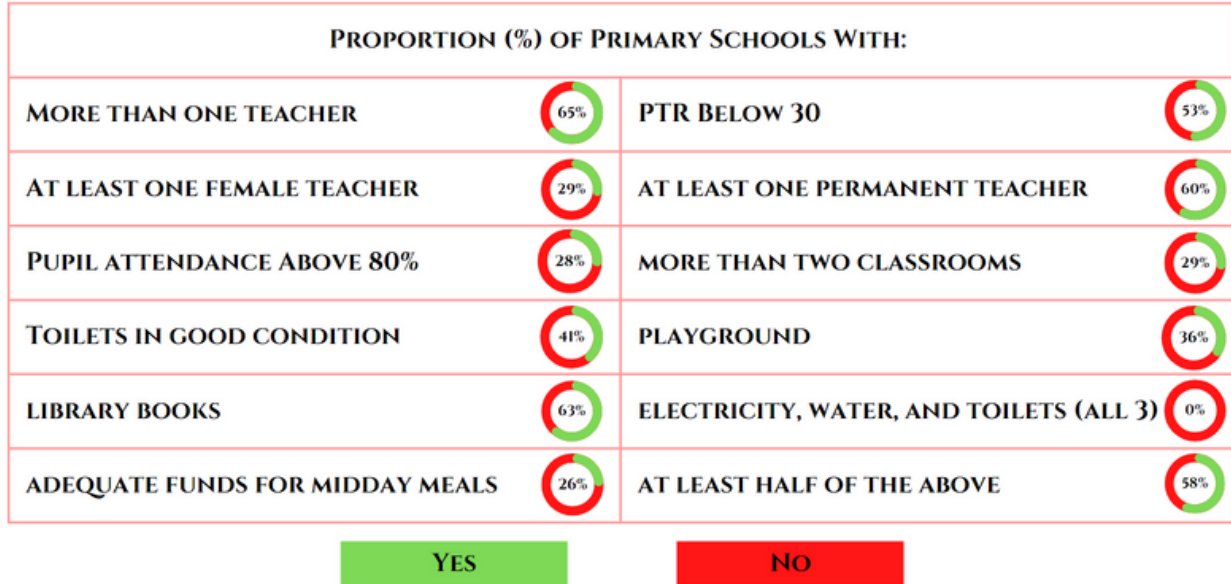
Despite signs of hope from the better schools, the GVSJ survey produces a gloomy picture of the schooling system in Jharkhand. The attached Report Cards summarise some of the quantifiable aspects of this picture. In every respect, we find that primary and upper-primary schools fall short of the most basic norms. That would also apply to less quantifiable aspects such as classroom activity, teaching methods and learning levels.



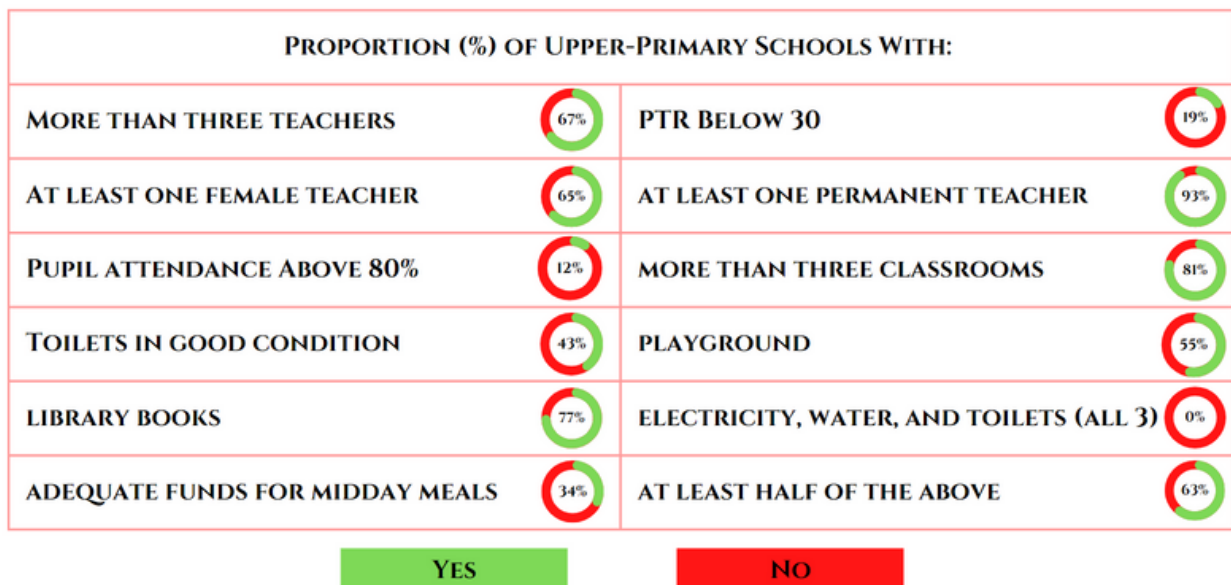
Millions of young children in Jharkhand are struggling to study in ramshackle schools managed by beleaguered teachers – often a single teacher with poor qualifications and training. During the Covid-19 crisis, those (a large majority) who were unable to continue studying online were dropped from the system like hot potatoes. When schools reopened earlier this year, many of them had forgotten much of what they had learnt earlier and also lost the habit of regular studying. Yet the system went back to “business as usual” with little being done to help them.

The dismal state of the schooling system in Jharkhand reflects decades of state apathy towards elementary education. This apathy is both a mistake and an injustice. It is a mistake because quality education for all could transform the economy and society of Jharkhand. It is an injustice because it keeps oppressed classes and communities where they are.

REPORT CARD: PRIMARY SCHOOLS



REPORT CARD: UPPER-PRIMARY SCHOOLS



The most troubling aspect of this crisis is that there is no public discussion of it. The victims have no voice and no power. Privileged families have taken refuge in expensive private schools – the schooling system is working fine as far as they are concerned. Underprivileged children, for their part, count for very little in the designs of policy-makers and political leaders. Even the Department of Education, in our limited experience, is more concerned with transfers, contracts, procurement and record-keeping than with what is happening to children in the schools. As for political leaders, they have shown very little interest in elementary education in Jharkhand. And so the chaos continues, year after year.

Ending this chaos is a long haul, but the effort must start now. In this effort, the Right to Education Act can serve as a useful roadmap. The Act is known mainly for a few specific provisions such as 25% reservation for poor children in private schools and the “no retention” clause. The aim of the Act, however, was not just to tinker here and there but to ensure the creation of a wholesome school environment for all children. The Act contains many useful provisions, relating for instance to minimum norms, classroom hours, curriculum development, private tuitions, instruction languages, constitutional values, teaching methods, physical safety, teacher training, participatory management, parent-teacher cooperation, social equity, pre-school education and more. It could be well used in multiple ways: to guide public policy, hold the government accountable, and help people to claim quality education as a matter of right.

The right to education, of course, goes beyond the Right to Education Act. But the Act is an important part of it. Incidentally, the State Commission for Protection of Child Rights (SCPCR) is supposed to monitor the implementation of the Act. The SCPCR, however, is yet to be activated in Jharkhand. This is another sign of the state government’s apathy towards elementary education.¹⁵

(15) Under the Right to Education Act, each state is also supposed to have a State Advisory Council for elementary education. If this Council exists in Jharkhand, it is a well-guarded secret.



Compliance with the Act calls for bold action on many fronts, since most schools in Jharkhand violate the Act left, right and centre. We stress two urgent measures as a starter. First, Jharkhand needs more teachers. Based on the survey data, we estimate that the number of teachers at the primary and upper-primary levels needs to be roughly doubled for compliance with the Act. Second, a strong grievance redressal structure needs to be put in place: one reason why the schooling system in Jharkhand is so bad is that people's complaints and views are not heard.

The primary responsibility for fixing the schooling system rests with the state government. The actions of the administration, and also of the political leadership, have a defining influence down the line. As we saw, irresponsibility (or "lack of earnestness") begins at the top. But social movements and the public at large also have a critical role to play in turning the schooling system around. For instance, social movements can help to make elementary education a more vibrant political issue. Many individuals and organisations in Jharkhand have already done excellent work in this field, but more – far more – can be done.

We end by recalling Dr. Ambedkar's inspiring slogan, "Educate, agitate, organise". There is a well-thought sequence in this slogan. Sometimes, however, education itself calls for some agitation. Surely that is the case in Jharkhand today.

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