

Education Governance – Decoding ASER 2025

Context: The release of the *Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2025* by Pratham Foundation (January 17, 2026). **Key Theme:** *The 'Demographic Dividend' vs. 'Demographic Disaster'*. **Keywords:** *Beyond Basics, Vocational Gap, Digital Paradox, STEM Gender Divide.*

1. The Context: Why 14-18 Matters?

The ASER 2025 report returned its focus to the **14-18 age group** (the "transition years"). This cohort is the first batch to fully experience the post-COVID education system.

- **The Governance Question:** Are we producing a workforce (Demographic Dividend) or just a crowd of degree-holders (Demographic Disaster)?

2. The 'Stream' Divide: Arts vs. STEM

The most striking finding of January 2026 is the persistence of the **Gendered Stream Divide**.

- **The Data:** While overall enrollment in the 14-18 age group is high (86.8%), the stream choice is stark.
 - **Boys:** Over **36%** opted for **Science/STEM** streams.
 - **Girls:** Only **28%** opted for Science, with the majority (over 55%) concentrated in **Arts/Humanities**.
- **Governance Implication:** This creates a structural barrier for women in the future workforce (AI, Engineering, Tech). Despite government schemes like *Vigyan Jyoti*, the "social conditioning" that "Science is for boys" remains a governance failure at the counseling level in government schools.

3. The 'Digital Paradox': Access vs. Ability

ASER 2025 exploded the myth of "Digital India" being equal to "Digital Literacy."

- **High Access:** **92%** of rural youth in this age group have a smartphone at home.
- **Low Ability:**
 - Only **43%** could perform a functional task like "Setting an Alarm" or "Browsing Maps."
 - Crucially for governance, less than **30%** could use the phone to access a government service (e.g., download an Aadhaar card or fill a scholarship form).
- **Conclusion:** We have created "Digital Consumers" (YouTube/Instagram) but not "Digital Citizens."

4. The 'Foundational' Crisis: The Reading Trap

The report highlighted a frightening stagnation in basic skills.

- **The Stat:** Nearly **25%** of students in the 14-18 age group **cannot read a Standard II level text** fluently in their regional language.
- **The Math Problem:** Over **56%** struggled with simple division (3-digit by 1-digit).

- **Impact:** If a 16-year-old cannot do basic division, they are unemployable in the modern economy, even for gig-work (delivery/logistics) which requires basic numeracy.

5. Mains Analysis: The Vocational Disconnect

- **NEP 2020 Target:** The National Education Policy aimed for **50%** of learners to have vocational exposure by 2025.
- **ASER Reality (Jan 2026):** Only **6-7%** of students surveyed were enrolled in any vocational course.
- **The Policy Gap:** The integration of "Skill Hubs" in schools (PM SHRI) has lagged. The stigma associated with vocational education (viewed as "blue-collar" or "failure's option") persists. Governance needs to shift from *supply-side* (building ITIs) to *demand-side* (dignity of labor).