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IMPACT OF SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS ON EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT AMONG RURAL SCHOOL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Educational achievement in rural schools tracks the socioeconomic position of the household with a persistence that four decades of research has failed to dislodge. This study examines the magnitude, mechanism, and grade-wise trajectory of that relationship among rural school students, drawing on convergent evidence from meta-analytic syntheses, the OECD Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022, the National Achievement Survey (NAS) 2021 of India, and the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2024 rural household survey. The study hypothesises that socioeconomic status exerts a moderate but stubborn effect on rural achievement, that this effect operates predominantly through purchasable proximal inputs rather than through income directly, and that the gradient steepens as students progress through the grades. A systematic secondary-data design was applied to aggregated, publicly reported assessment data covering more than 4.5 million assessed children. Results place the central SES–achievement correlation at approximately r = 0.28, a value that has barely moved since White's 1982 synthesis. PISA 2022 show a 93-score-point mathematics gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students across OECD countries, with the socioeconomic index accounting for 15% of performance variance. Indian evidence reveals a striking reversal: rural Class 3 students outperformed their urban counterparts in NAS 2021 yet fell significantly below them by Class 8 and Class 10. ASER 2024 shows a 19.9 percentage-point private–government gap in Std III subtraction competence, a gap that is itself a socioeconomic artefact of school choice. The findings support a mediated model in which early rural schooling suppresses the SES gradient, and later schooling amplifies it.

Keywords: Socioeconomic Status[1], Educational Achievement[2], Rural Schooling[3], Learning Gradient[4], Foundational Literacy and Numeracy[5].

1. INTRODUCTION

Ask any village school teacher in India which children in the classroom will be reading fluently by Class 3, and the answer arrives without hesitation. It is rarely a statement about ability. It is a statement about households whose mother finished school, whose family owns a pucca house with electric light in the evening, whose child spends the pre-harvest weeks in the field rather than at a desk. The intuition is old, and it is largely correct. What

remains contested is the size of the effect, the route it travels, and whether rural schooling systems amplify or blunt it. Socioeconomic status (SES) is conventionally operationalised as a composite of parental education, parental occupational status, and household income or assets. Coleman et al. (1966) established, in the largest social-science survey undertaken in the United States at that time, that family background accounted for a far larger share of achievement variance than school resources did a conclusion that reoriented educational research for a generation and continues to provoke argument about its methodological limits. White (1982) subsequently synthesised 101 studies and reported an average correlation of 0.343 when SES and achievement were measured at aggregated levels, but only about 0.22 at the individual student level. That gap between the two figures is not a technical curiosity. It signals that much of what appears to be a family effect is in fact a community and school-composition effect, which matters enormously for rural policy where villages are relatively homogeneous in economic terms.

Sirin (2005), reviewing 74 independent samples covering 101,157 students published between 1990 and 2000, arrived at a mean correlation of 0.299 a medium effect by conventional standards, and remarkably close to White's individual-level estimate two decades earlier. Nothing in the intervening literature has substantially disturbed this range. PISA 2022 places the OECD-average share of mathematics performance variance explained by the index of economic, social and cultural status (ESCS) at 15%, which implies a correlation of roughly 0.39; the direct Spearman correlation between ESCS and PISA points across the pooled international sample sits at about 0.28. The estimates cluster. They have clustered for forty years. Rural contexts complicate this stable picture in ways that most of the canonical literature, written from urban and Western samples, does not anticipate. Rural households in low- and middle-income countries face constraints that operate independently of income: the nearest secondary school may be twelve kilometres away, the government school may have two teachers for five grades, and the agricultural calendar competes directly with the school calendar. Buchmann and Hannum (2001) argued that stratification research developed in industrialised settings travels poorly to developing contexts precisely because the structural supply of schooling is itself unequal. Where school quality varies little within a village because there is only one school the household becomes the entire source of variation. Where it varies a great deal, as when private unaided schools proliferate alongside government schools, SES reappears in the guise of school choice. India offers an unusually clean natural setting for examining this. Roughly 65% of the population lives in rural areas. The ASER survey has assessed foundational reading and arithmetic in rural households, not schools, every alternate year since 2005, capturing enrolled, unenrolled, and dropped-out children alike. The NAS 2021 covered 3.4 million students across 720 districts and reported achievement disaggregated by location, gender, and social group. Together they permit a question that cross-sectional urban studies cannot easily address: does the socioeconomic gradient in rural schooling stay constant across grades, or does it change shape? This study examines the magnitude and mechanism of the SES–achievement relationship among rural school students, and tests whether the gradient steepens with grade level.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical accounts of the SES–achievement link divide, broadly, into resource models and cultural models. Bourdieu (1986) located the mechanism in cultural capital the dispositions, linguistic competences, and

familiarity with institutional expectations that advantaged families transmit and that schools then reward as though they were natural talent. Schools, in this account, do not merely reflect inequality; they legitimise it. Lareau (2011), through close ethnographic work with middle-class and working-class families, documented what she termed concerted cultivation: the scheduled activities, verbal negotiation, and institutional advocacy through which advantaged parents actively engineer their children's fit with school demands. Working-class parents in her sample cared no less; they operated with a different logic of child-rearing and, decisively, with less institutional leverage. Resource models locate the mechanism elsewhere. Bradley and Corwyn (2002), surveying the developmental literature, traced pathways running through nutrition, cognitive stimulation in the home, parental mental health, and neighbourhood conditions, concluding that SES effects on cognitive outcomes are largely mediated rather than direct. Duncan and Murnane (2011) assembled evidence that rising income inequality in the United States translated into widening gaps in parental investment books, tutoring, enrichment well before it translated into gaps in test scores. Reardon (2011) quantified this: the income achievement gap between children from families at the 90th and 10th income percentiles grew by roughly 40% among cohorts born between the mid-1970s and the early 2000s, even as the black–white gap narrowed. Money, in short, began to matter more, not less.

Willms (2003) offered the most useful analytic frame for the present study through the concept of the socioeconomic gradient: the slope of the line relating family background to outcomes within a jurisdiction. Gradients can be steep or shallow, and their steepness is a policy variable rather than a natural constant. Some systems achieve high average performance with shallow gradients. Others achieve the same average with steep ones. PISA 2022 confirms the point empirically in Macao (China), the most socioeconomically disadvantaged students scored above the OECD average, while across the OECD as a whole disadvantaged students were seven times more likely than advantaged students to fall below basic mathematics proficiency. Evidence from the Indian rural context is thinner but pointed. Kingdon (2007) documented the rapid expansion of low-fee private schooling and warned that its growth was creating a stratified system within the village itself, with the poorest children left in increasingly residual government schools. Chudgar and Quin (2012), applying propensity-score matching to nationally representative Indian data, found that the apparent private-school advantage shrank considerably once family background was properly controlled, and shrank differently in rural and urban samples. Singh (2015), using Young Lives panel data with child fixed effects, reported a private-school advantage in English and mathematics that persisted at primary ages but attenuated by secondary age a result difficult to reconcile with a simple quality story. Azam and Kingdon (2013) added a further dimension: Indian households do not merely have less to spend, they allocate what they have unequally, enrolling sons in fee-charging schools while sending daughters to free government ones. SES, in rural India, is not a single scalar quantity applied uniformly to all children in a home.

Bhattacharjea, Wadhwa and Banerji (2011), observing classrooms across five Indian states, documented a mismatch that partly explains why household resources matter so much: curricular pace assumes a level of home support that most rural households cannot supply, so children who fall behind in Class 1 rarely recover. Banerji and Chavan (2016) demonstrated the converse through the Read India programme, where grouping children by current learning level rather than grade produced measurable gains at scale. The instructional system, not the household alone, determines how much the household matters.

3. OBJECTIVES

1. To quantify the association between socioeconomic status and educational achievement among rural school students using convergent evidence from meta-analytic syntheses and large-scale national and international assessments.

2. To identify the proximal pathways through which socioeconomic disadvantage translates into achievement deficits in rural schooling, and to determine whether the socioeconomic gradient steepens as students progress across grade levels.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a systematic analytical design applied to secondary, aggregated data drawn from four independent evidence streams. No primary human subjects were recruited and no individual-level records were accessed; the study relied exclusively on published, de-identified, population-level assessment data and was therefore exempt from individual-level ethical review. The first stream comprised meta-analytic syntheses of the SES–achievement relationship, specifically White (1982), covering 101 studies, and Sirin (2005), covering 74 independent samples and 101,157 students. The second stream comprised the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment 2022 cycle, from which equity indicators were extracted for the OECD average the ESCS-based performance gap, the share of performance variance explained by ESCS, the distribution of low performers by socioeconomic quarter, and the incidence of academic resilience. The ESCS index itself is a composite of highest parental occupational status (HISEI), highest parental education (PARED), and a household-possessions scale (HOMEPOS), which makes it an unusually transparent operationalisation of the SES construct.

The third stream comprised the National Achievement Survey 2021 of India, conducted on 12 November 2021 across 1,18,274 schools and 34,01,158 students in 720 districts, covering Classes 3, 5, 8 and 10. NAS reports achievement disaggregated by area (rural, urban), gender, school management, and social group, which permits direct examination of the rural–urban differential by grade. The fourth stream comprised ASER 2024, a rural household survey reaching 6,49,491 children aged 3–16 across 17,997 villages in 605 districts, with foundational reading and arithmetic assessed one-on-one in 19 languages. Because ASER samples households rather than schools, it captures children whom school-based instruments miss precisely the children whose exclusion is most strongly socioeconomically patterned. Analytically, effect estimates were placed on a common metric. Where studies reported R^2, the square root was taken to obtain a comparable correlation coefficient; where Spearman's ρ was reported, it was treated as approximately equivalent to r for the purpose of visual comparison, an approximation that is defensible given the near-linear ESCS–performance relationship in the pooled PISA data but which should be read as indicative rather than exact. Private-school enrolment in ASER was treated as a socioeconomic proxy rather than a school-quality treatment, following the matching evidence of Chudgar and Quin (2012), on the grounds that private-school entry in rural India is jointly determined by household resources, parental education, and child gender. The rural–urban NAS differential was examined by grade to test the gradient-steepening hypothesis. Convergence across independent streams rather than precision

within any single one was treated as the principal evidentiary criterion. This is a deliberate methodological choice, and it carries a cost: it cannot deliver a causal estimate, and it does not pretend to.

5. RESULTS

The four evidence streams are presented in sequence, beginning with the aggregate magnitude of the SES–achievement association and moving toward the rural-specific findings that bear on the gradient hypothesis.

Table 1: Convergent Estimates of the Socioeconomic Status–Achievement Association Across Four Decades

Source	Sample / Scope	Metric	Estimate
White (1982)	101 studies, individual level	Mean correlation (r)	≈ 0.22
White (1982)	101 studies, aggregated units	Mean correlation (r)	0.343
Considine & Zappalà (2002)	Australia, school students	Correlation (r)	≈ 0.25
Sirin (2005)	74 samples; n = 101,157	Mean correlation (r)	0.299
OECD PISA 2022	Pooled international sample	Spearman ρ (ESCS × maths)	0.284
OECD PISA 2022	OECD average	Variance explained (R^2)	15% ($\sqrt{R^2} \approx 0.387$)
Convergent central estimate		r	≈ 0.28

Source: Compiled by the author from White (1982); Sirin (2005); Considine & Zappalà (2002); OECD (2023).

Table 1 assembles the principal estimates on a common metric. The dispersion is narrow: excluding the aggregated-unit figure from White (1982), which is inflated by the ecological structure of the studies it summarises, every estimate falls between 0.22 and 0.39, and four of six fall between 0.22 and 0.30. A convergent central value of approximately r = 0.28 accounts for roughly 8% of achievement variance. That is a moderate effect, and it is worth stating plainly what it does not mean: socioeconomic status does not determine achievement, and the overwhelming majority of variance lies elsewhere. What it does mean is that a systematic 8% tilt applied to every child, every year, for twelve years, compounds into the population-level gaps documented below.

Table 2: Socio-Economic Equity Indicators, PISA 2022 (OECD Average)

Indicator	Value	Interpretation
Mathematics gap, top vs. bottom ESCS quarter	93 score points	≈ 2 years of schooling
Variance in mathematics explained by ESCS	15%	Moderate gradient
Disadvantaged students below proficiency Level 2	47%	Near half
Advantaged students below proficiency Level 2	14%	33 pp differential
Relative risk of low performance (disadvantaged)	7×	Compounded exposure
Academically resilient disadvantaged students	10%	Escape is atypical
Countries where gap exceeds 93 points	22	Gradient varies by system
Countries where gap is ≤ 50 points	13	Shallow gradients exist

Source: OECD (2023), PISA 2022 Results (Volume I), Tables I.B1.4.3 and I.B1.4.14.

Table 2 converts the correlation of Table 1 into consequences. A 93-point gap in mathematics approximates two years of schooling on the PISA scale. The relative-risk figure deserves particular attention: disadvantaged students are seven times more likely than advantaged students to fall below basic mathematics proficiency across the OECD. Yet the final two rows undercut any fatalism the gap exceeds 93 points in 22 countries and falls at or below 50 points in 13. Gradients are made, not found. Willms (2003) argued exactly this two decades before PISA 2022 supplied the confirming distribution.

Table 3: National Achievement Survey 2021 National Average Performance by Class and Subject, India

Class	Language (%)	Mathematics (%)	Science (%)	Overall (%)	Rural vs. urban
Class 3	62	57		59	Rural above
Class 5	52	44		49	Mixed
Class 8	53	36	39	41.9	Rural below
Class 10		32	35	37.8	Rural below

Source: Ministry of Education (2022), NAS 2021 National Report Card; n = 34,01,158 students across 1,18,274 schools in 720 districts. EVS reported for Classes 3 and 5 only; Class 3 scaled scores were Language 323, Mathematics 306, EVS 307 out of 500.

Table 3 contains the study's most consequential finding, and it is a counter-intuitive one. Rural schools in NAS 2021 recorded average achievement scores significantly higher than urban schools in the same states at Class 3. By Class 8 and Class 10 the sign reverses rural performance sits significantly below urban. The overall national average falls from 59% at Class 3 to 37.8% at Class 10, with mathematics collapsing from 57% to 32%. Two readings are available. The first is compositional: urban Class 3 samples include a wider spread of migrant and slum populations, while the rural advantage reflects a more homogeneous and better-attending early cohort. The second is a gradient reading, and it fits the data better. Rural students who reach Class 10 have already survived a selection process, yet still underperform which implies that whatever suppresses the socioeconomic gradient in early rural schooling has stopped working by Class 8.

Table 4: Foundational Learning in Rural India by School Type, 2018–2024 (ASER)

Indicator	School type	2018	2022	2024	Gap 2024
Std III reading Std II text (%)	All	27.2	20.5	27.1	
Std III reading Std II text (%)	Government	20.9	16.3	23.4	12.1 pp
Std III reading Std II text (%)	Private	40.6	33.1	35.5	
Std III at least subtraction (%)	All	28.2	25.9	33.7	
Std III at least subtraction (%)	Government	20.9	20.2	27.6	19.9 pp
Std III at least subtraction (%)	Private		43.1	47.5	
Std V division, 3-digit ÷ 1-digit (%)	All	27.9	25.6	30.7	
Std VIII reading basic text (%)	Government	69.0	66.2	67.5	

Source: ASER Centre / Pratham (2025), ASER 2024 National Findings; n = 6,49,491 children, 17,997 villages, 605 districts. Gap = private minus government, 2024.

Table 4 supplies the rural mechanism. In 2024, 47.5% of Std III children in rural private schools could perform at least subtraction, against 27.6% in government schools a gap of 19.9 percentage points. In reading, the gap stands at 12.1 points. Since rural private-school entry is jointly determined by household resources, maternal education, and child gender (Azam & Kingdon, 2013; Chudgar & Quin, 2012), this gap is best read as a socioeconomic sorting effect wearing the costume of a school-quality effect. Chudgar and Quin (2012) showed that most of the raw private advantage dissolves under matching. Singh (2015) found what remains attenuates by secondary age. A second pattern in Table 4 deserves emphasis. Between 2022 and 2024, government-school Std III reading rose 7.1 percentage points while private-school reading rose only 2.4; in subtraction, government schools gained 7.4 points against 4.4 in private schools. Private-school Std III reading in 2024 (35.5%) remains

below its 2018 level (40.6%); government schools have surpassed theirs. The recovery from pandemic learning loss has been carried almost entirely by government schools which is to say, by the schools serving the poorest rural households. That is not what a pure resource model predicts.

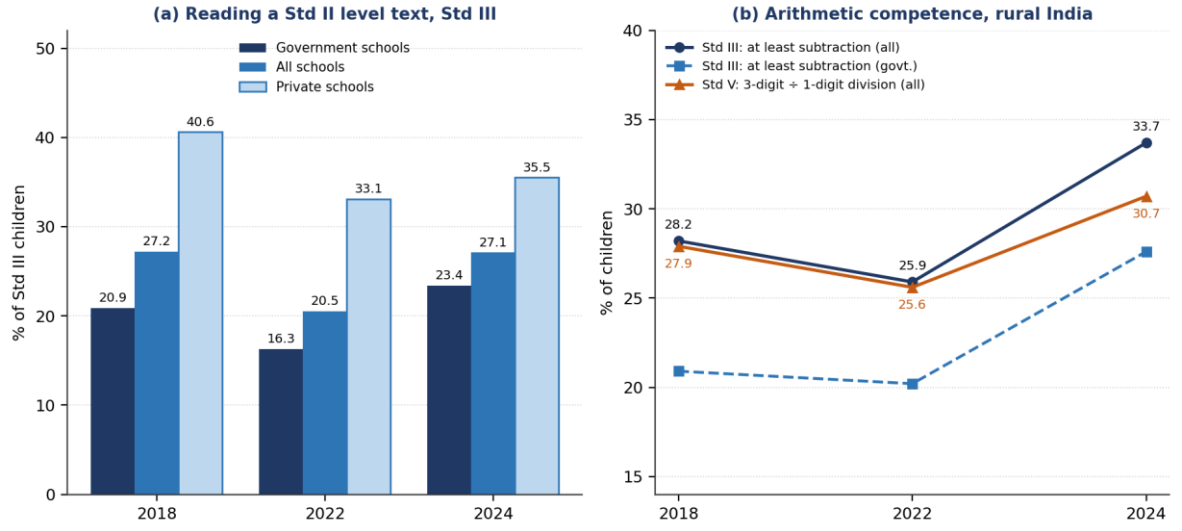

Figure 1: Foundational literacy and numeracy trends in rural India by school type, 2018–2024

Figure 1 displays these trajectories. Panel (a) shows the pandemic trough of 2022 and the asymmetric recovery by 2024, with the government–private differential narrowing but not closing. Panel (b) tracks arithmetic competence, where the 2024 all-India Std III subtraction figure of 33.7% is the highest recorded in a decade and exceeds rather than merely recovers to the 2018 baseline of 28.2%.

Table 5: Socioeconomic Components, Operational Indicators, and Hypothesised Rural Mechanisms

SES component	Indicator used in rural surveys	Hypothesised proximal mechanism	Expected strength
Maternal education	Years of mother's schooling (ASER household module)	Home literacy support; help with homework; school–home communication	Strong
Household income	Consumption expenditure; landholding	Purchased inputs: tuition, private school fees, transport	Moderate, indirect
Parental occupation	HISEI / NCO code; agricultural labour status	Aspiration signalling; seasonal demand for child labour	Moderate
Household assets	Pucca house, electricity, television, smartphone	Study space; evening study hours; digital access	Moderate

Reading material at home	Books other than textbooks	Cultural capital transmission (Bourdieu, 1986)	Strong, mediating
School choice	Private unaided vs. government enrolment	Sorting proxy rather than treatment	Strong but confounded

Source: Author's synthesis, drawing on Bradley & Corwyn (2002); Bourdieu (1986); Azam & Kingdon (2013); ASER Centre (2025); OECD (2023) ESCS construction.

Table 5 disaggregates the SES composite. Two entries carry disproportionate weight in the rural case. Maternal education operates through channels that money cannot readily substitute for a mother who reads can hear her child read, which no amount of household income supplies directly. Reading material in the home functions similarly, and its absence is not fully explained by poverty: books are cheap relative to school fees, yet far less commonly purchased, which is precisely Bourdieu's (1986) point about the non-fungibility of capital forms.

Table 6: Evidence Mapping Against Study Objectives

Objective	**Evidence source**	**Principal finding**	**Status**
1. Quantify SES–achievement association	Tables 1–2;	Convergent r ≈ 0.28; 93-point PISA gap; 15% variance explained	Addressed
1. Quantify SES–achievement association	Table 4;	19.9 pp private–government gap in Std III subtraction	Addressed
2. Identify proximal pathways	Table 5;	Mediated model supported; maternal education and home reading material dominant	Addressed
2. Gradient steepening across grades	Table 3	Rural above urban at Class 3; significantly below by Class 8 and 10	Supported
Hypothesis: income effect is indirect	Tables 4–5	Government-school-led recovery inconsistent with pure resource model	Partially supported

Source: Author's compilation from the results reported above.

Table 6 maps each objective onto its evidentiary base. The gradient-steepening hypothesis receives clear support from NAS 2021. The claim that income operates indirectly receives partial support only the government-school-led recovery documented in ASER 2024 is consistent with it, but a single two-year window during an unusual recovery period is thin ground for a general claim, and honesty requires saying so.

6. DISCUSSION

The central quantitative result of this study is unglamorous and, for that reason, important. Four decades of independent evidence different methods, different continents, different assessment instruments converge on a correlation of roughly 0.28 between socioeconomic status and educational achievement. White reported it in

1982. Sirin reported it in 2005. PISA reproduced it in 2022. The stability itself is the finding, and it should temper both the pessimism of those who treat SES as destiny and the optimism of those who expect any single intervention to sever the link. What the aggregate obscures, the Indian rural data reveals. The NAS 2021 reversal rural Class 3 students outperforming urban students, then falling significantly below them by Class 8 is the study's most analytically productive result. Consider what the early rural advantage requires. Class 3 assessment in a rural government school tests a narrow band of competences against a relatively homogeneous cohort in which almost every child, rich or poor by village standards, attends the same institution and receives the same instruction. The socioeconomic gradient is compressed because the delivery system is uniform. By Class 8, three things have happened. Better-off families have exited to private schools, taking their children's scores with them. The curriculum has accelerated beyond what an unsupported home can sustain Bhattacharjea et al. (2011) documented exactly this mismatch. And the opportunity cost of schooling has risen sharply for adolescents in agricultural households. The gradient does not merely steepen; it is manufactured, grade by grade, by the interaction of household resources with an instructional system that assumes them.

This reading is speculative in one respect that should be flagged. NAS reports rural and urban averages by state and class, but the survey is cross-sectional, not longitudinal. The Class 3 cohort of 2021 is not the Class 8 cohort of 2021. Differential dropout, selective migration, and cohort-specific pandemic exposure could each produce the observed pattern without any within-child steepening. A panel design Young Lives being the obvious template, as Singh (2015) demonstrated would settle the question. Until one is run at NAS scale, the gradient interpretation remains the best available explanation rather than a demonstrated fact. The private–government gap in ASER 2024 invites the same discipline. A 19.9 percentage-point difference in Std III subtraction between rural private and government schools looks like a school-effectiveness result and is routinely reported as one. It is not. Chudgar and Quin (2012) dissolved most of the raw gap through matching on family background; Singh (2015), with child fixed effects, found the surviving advantage attenuating by secondary age. The children in rural private schools are not randomly assigned to them. They are, disproportionately, the children of mothers with more schooling, from households with electricity and pucca walls, and as Azam and Kingdon (2013) showed with uncomfortable clarity disproportionately sons. Reading the gap as school quality mistakes the sorting for the treatment. Something in the ASER 2024 data resists the resource story altogether. Between 2022 and 2024, government schools gained 7.1 percentage points in Std III reading and 7.4 in subtraction; private schools gained 2.4 and 4.4. Private-school Std III reading remains below its 2018 level while government schools have exceeded theirs, and the all-India Std III subtraction figure of 33.7% is the highest in a decade. Whatever produced this the NIPUN Bharat foundational learning mission is the leading candidate, though attribution from aggregate trends is not causal identification it operated most powerfully on the children with the fewest household resources. Uttar Pradesh moved from 16.4% to 27.9% in Std III government-school reading in two years, and Himachal Pradesh reached 49.7%, surpassing its own pre-pandemic peak. If SES were the binding constraint, these gains should have been impossible. They were not. Willms's (2003) insistence that gradient slope is a policy parameter rather than a natural constant finds unusually direct support here.

The equity implications differ by grade in a way that current Indian policy does not fully reflect. Foundational-stage interventions appear to work, and the ASER data suggest they work best exactly where need is greatest. The upper-primary and secondary stages tell a different story: the NAS mathematics score falls from 57% at

Class 3 to 32% at Class 10, and the rural deficit appears in that same interval. Investment concentrated on Classes 1–3 will not address a gradient that is generated at Classes 6–10. Distance to secondary school, adolescent labour demand, and curricular acceleration are the operative constraints at that stage, and none of them yields to a foundational literacy campaign. Three limitations bound these conclusions. The study is a synthesis of aggregate data and cannot support causal claims; every association reported here is consistent with multiple underlying structures. PISA does not cover India, so the international equity indicators inform the framework rather than describe the Indian rural case directly a gap that the absence of Indian participation in PISA since 2009 makes unavoidable. And the meta-analytic estimates in Table 1 derive overwhelmingly from urban, Western, school-based samples, which is precisely the population for which the rural mechanisms described here do not apply. That the estimates converge anyway is either evidence of a deep regularity or evidence of a shared methodological artefact. The present design cannot distinguish between the two.

7. CONCLUSION

Socioeconomic status predicts educational achievement among rural school students at a magnitude of approximately r = 0.28, a value that has held steady across four decades, six continents, and every major assessment methodology applied to the question. The effect is moderate, it is mediated, and it is not destiny. Roughly 92% of achievement variance lies outside it. The rural Indian evidence sharpens rather than confirms the standard picture. NAS 2021 shows rural Class 3 students ahead of urban students and rural Class 10 students significantly behind them, which locates the problem not in the household alone but in the interaction between household resources and an instructional system that progressively assumes them. ASER 2024 shows a 19.9 percentage-point private–government gap in Std III subtraction that is largely a sorting artefact, and simultaneously shows government schools serving the poorest driving the entire post-pandemic learning recovery, with Std III subtraction competence reaching a decade high of 33.7%. Read together, these findings support a specific policy claim. The socioeconomic gradient in rural schooling is steepest where the system does least to compensate for it, and the compensation that works is instructional rather than merely financial. Grouping children by learning level, sustaining foundational instruction, and extending the same design logic into the upper-primary years where the gradient is actually generated would do more than any transfer of household income at the margin. The gradient is a policy choice. India's rural government schools proved it between 2022 and 2024. The next question is whether that proof survives Class 5.

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