



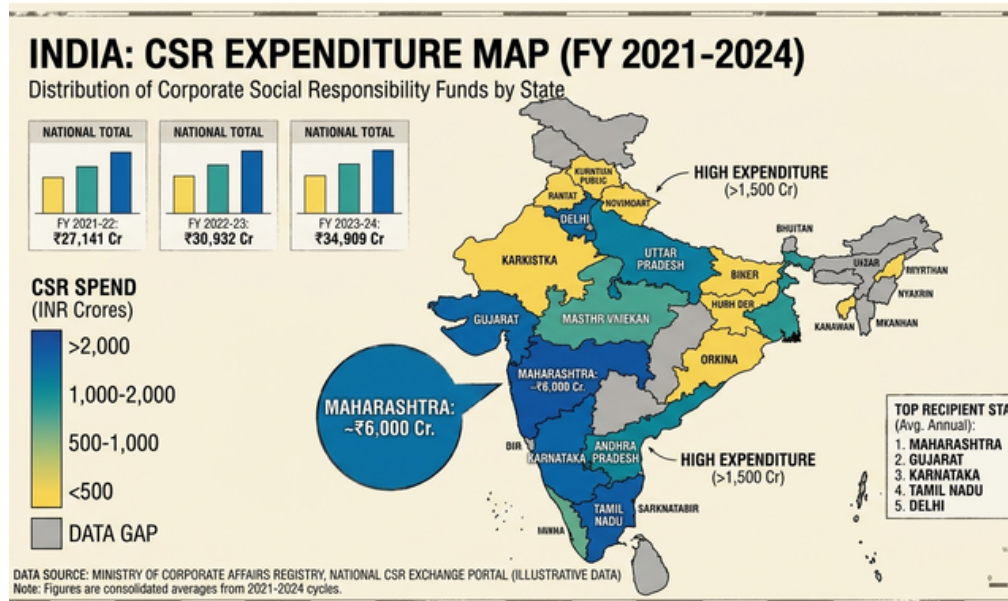
JEET KI AOR

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CSR Geography: Mapping The Regional Inequality

You may be wondering which regions of the country get the benefit from CSR expenditures of the Indian companies. Unfortunately, it is not the most deserving, less developed states of the country but the most advanced of them.

Maharashtra, Gujarat, Karnataka, Tamilnadu, and Delhi have been the top recipient states considering the average annual spends of companies for Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Where the moneys should have actually gone in the last financial year 2023-24, Bihar, and North Eastern states for example received only ₹260 crores and low-single digit percentages of average spend, respectively. If we analyze the last three years spend, a glaring structural paradox emerges, revealing that corporate capital is reinforcing regional inequality rather than resolving it.



Mapping the geographical inequality - A picture speaks thousand words

The Corporate Echo Chamber: Feeding the Well-Fed

Over the last three recorded financial cycles, India's aggregate CSR pool expanded dramatically, peaking at approximately ₹35,000 crores. However, the trajectory of these funds follows commercial success rather than human deprivation. The five industrialized economic powerhouses consistently capture nearly 60% of the entire national CSR outlay.

Inside:

- **CSR Geography:**
Why corporate education funding continues to cluster around developed states- and what it means for educational equity.
- **When Digital Learning Becomes a Second Teacher:**
What a tribal school classroom reveals about using technology to strengthen-not replace-teaching.
- **The Enrollment Trap:**
Why keeping children engaged in learning may be a bigger challenge than getting them into school.

A definitive illustration of this trend is found in India's largest corporate donor, Reliance Industries Limited (RIL). Over the years, a substantial portion of its massive multi-thousand-crore CSR budget has been structurally channeled into hyper-localized flagship projects like the Sir H.N. Reliance Foundation Hospital in Mumbai and the world-class Jio Institute (initially conceptualized as Reliance University) located across an expansive urban campus in Ulwe, Navi Mumbai. While these institutions undeniably foster world-class medical and higher education frameworks, their geographic placement within an already thriving Tier-1 metropolitan corridor highlights a systemic distortion.

This phenomenon is replicated across the corporate spectrum. IT giants headquartered in Bengaluru heavily funnel their tech-education CSR into surrounding districts in Karnataka. Major automobile manufacturers in Chennai concentrate their rural development drives within Tamil Nadu's industrialized borders.

In stark contrast, states tracking the lowest on the Human Development Index (HDI)-such as Bihar, Jharkhand, and the heavily underserved regions of the Northeast-scarcely touch the periphery of this capital boom. While Navi Mumbai or Bengaluru receives state-of-the-art educational complexes, children in rural Bihar are left stranded by an annual statewide CSR allocation that hovers around a negligible ₹260 crores (FY23-24).

The "Local Area" Trap: Understanding the Root Cause

This geographical concentration is not born out of corporate malice, but rather out of systemic compliance bottlenecks. The primary driver is a foundational provision under Section 135(5) of the Companies Act, 2013, which directs corporate boards to give "preference to the local area and areas around it where it operates".

Because, India's manufacturing facilities, corporate headquarters, and technology corridors are heavily clustered in states like Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka, corporate boards naturally anchor their projects in-situ. The High-Level Committee on CSR has clarified that this preference is legally directory rather than mandatory. Yet, corporate compliance teams frequently treat it as a strict regulatory shield to avoid any legal auditing discrepancies with the Ministry of Corporate Affairs. Furthermore, executing projects locally is operationally convenient. It allows corporate leadership to easily monitor initiatives, engage employees in volunteering, and forge partnerships with familiar municipal agencies. This legal over-compliance effectively locks capital within industrialized borders.

The Absorptive Capacity Crisis

The second structural hurdle is the stark regional imbalance in institutional readiness among non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

A corporate donor cannot simply wire money to a remote village; they face stringent regulatory penalties if their implementation partners fail to submit rigorous audited financials, impact metrics, and statutory clearances.

Industrialized states boast a highly professionalized, corporate-ready civil society ecosystem. NGOs based in Mumbai or Bengaluru are staffed with compliance experts who understand how to structure board reports, track Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), and manage large-scale grants under intense auditor scrutiny.

Conversely, grassroots organizations in Bihar, Odisha, or Nagaland are often structurally lean, focusing entirely on ground-level execution. They frequently lack the bureaucratic bandwidth to navigate complex corporate reporting protocols. As a result, even well-intentioned corporate donors choose the path of least compliance resistance, routing capital back to ready-made urban non-profits rather than navigating the institutional vacuums of the hinterlands.

Rebalancing the Scales: The Way Forward

If Corporate Social Responsibility is to live up to its constitutional intent of inclusive nation-building, the current geographic distribution model must be heavily reformed. A multi-pronged intervention is required to bridge this widening developmental divide:

Leveraging the Social Stock Exchange (SSE): The SSE pre-vets listed NPOs, corporate boards can confidently deploy capital to remote regions without fearing compliance failures, safely bypassing the "local area" constraint.

Aggressive Up-Skilling of Rural NGOs: Central public sector undertakings (PSUs) and major philanthropic foundations should allocate dedicated budgets specifically to train rural and Northeastern NGOs in corporate governance, statutory auditing, and technology-led tracking.

Policy Incentives for "Aspirational Districts":

The Ministry of Corporate Affairs (MCA) should introduce weightage advantages or weighted compliance credits for companies that actively choose to move past their regional operational hubs to fund projects inside NITI Aayog's designated Aspirational Districts. Only by actively untethering corporate conscience from corporate geography can India ensure that its immense economic growth systematically lifts the communities that need it the most.

When Digital Learning Becomes a Second Teacher

In conversations around digital education, one assumption appears repeatedly: that technology works best when every student has a personal device and continuous internet access. A recent interaction with Sharmila Golkonda, a science teacher teaching Classes 6 to 10 in a tribal school setting, offers a quieter and perhaps more useful reality - digital learning can still work meaningfully even when those conditions do not exist. Unlike many discussions around EdTech that begin with devices and apps, Sharmila's approach begins with the classroom. Introduced to the platform through her principal and teacher meetings, she adopted it not as a replacement for teaching, but as a structured revision and preparation tool. The objective was simple: help students revisit concepts quickly, complete syllabus coverage more effectively, and create more opportunities for understanding within limited classroom time.

Her school presents a context familiar across much of rural India. Students do not necessarily own smartphones or personal devices. Yet the absence of individual access did not become a reason to abandon digital learning. Instead, classroom panels became shared learning infrastructure, allowing lessons to be experienced collectively rather than individually. For students from tribal backgrounds, where exposure to digital systems is often limited, this shift matters - not because it modernizes learning, but because it expands access to explanations beyond the textbook. One of the strongest themes that emerged from the conversation was intentionality. Teachers are not opening videos and stepping aside. Preparation still happens beforehand. Content is reviewed, understood, and integrated into classroom delivery. The platform becomes another voice in the room, helping reinforce concepts, offer alternative explanations, and support revision. Teaching remains central. In this context, JEET LMS has evolved into an enabling layer for government school teachers-provided free of cost through the partnership between Ramakrishna Sarada Samiti (RKSS) and APTWREIS - with the ambition of making high-quality digital support accessible at system scale.

At the same time, the interview surfaced an important lesson for digital education design: content alone is insufficient. Assessments matter. Sharmila pointed out that practice questions would become more useful if they reflected multiple difficulty levels - easy, moderate, and advanced; allowing teachers to understand not just whether students answered correctly, but where learning gaps exist. This feedback has already begun shaping improvements to the platform, with JEET committing to expand assessments and practice support from the current ~5% lesson coverage toward near-universal coverage across the platform through online and offline tutor-supported formats. In doing so, JEET aims to demonstrate how free, curriculum-aligned digital infrastructure for government schools can become an enabling layer for large-scale educational transformation.

Another insight came from curriculum changes. New textbooks for Classes 6 to 9 mean that digital platforms cannot remain static. If content does not evolve alongside curriculum, relevance quickly declines. Sustained adoption therefore depends not only on creating resources, but continuously aligning them with classroom realities. Perhaps the most encouraging observation was cultural rather than technical: nearly 60% of the teaching staff had already begun using the platform in some form. Adoption was not being driven by mandate, but by usefulness. This interaction offers an important reminder. Digital education in India may not begin with one device per child. It may begin with one teacher, one classroom screen, and one willingness to rethink how learning happens.

The question then is **not whether technology can replace teaching. It is whether we are designing digital systems that help teachers teach better.**



Ms. Sharmila Golkonda

Ms. Sharmila Golkonda of Andhra Pradesh Tribal Welfare Residential School, Giddaluru, Markapuram District, Andhra Pradesh teaches Science to Classes 6 to 10 in a tribal residential school in Andhra Pradesh. Having actively used the JEET platform over the last six months, she has integrated it into lesson preparation, revision, and classroom delivery to help students engage with concepts beyond textbook explanations.



No platform can replace teaching completely. Students need one-to-one explanation and interaction to truly understand concepts - digital tools can support that process, but the teacher remains at the centre of learning.

MS. SHARMILA GOLKONDA

The Enrollment Trap: Why Keeping Children Learning Is Harder Than Getting Them to School

If there is one assumption that repeatedly weakens education conversations in India, it is this: that once a child enters school, learning will follow.

Over three years of conversations across grassroots organisations, one pattern emerged almost everywhere enrollment is rarely the hardest part anymore.

Retention is.

Many of the organisations we documented were not building schools. They were trying to keep schools relevant. Their work often began after admission forms were filled and attendance registers were complete. The real challenge appeared later: helping children continue showing up, continue understanding, and continue believing that education was worth staying for. This challenge looked different in different places.

For some communities, migration interrupted continuity. Children disappeared for months as families moved for work. In others, attendance dropped because learning gaps accumulated quietly until classrooms became intimidating. In tribal and rural regions, distance and transport still mattered. Elsewhere, children remained physically present but emotionally detached - attending school without meaningfully participating.

What stood out from our conversations was that successful organisations rarely attacked dropout directly. Instead, they worked backward.

They strengthened parent engagement. They introduced after-school support. They invested in teachers. They created peer networks. They introduced sports, libraries, digital tools, and community activities, not because these were extracurricular, but because they gave children reasons to remain connected.

This revealed something uncomfortable. Education systems often measure success through entry: enrolment rates, infrastructure, admissions. But children do not experience education as an entry event. They experience it as a daily decision.

That decision is shaped by dozens of small signals: whether someone notices absence, whether teachers explain concepts clearly, whether learning feels achievable, whether school offers dignity, whether home sees value in continuing. This is also why many small organisations create outsized impact. Their proximity allows them to respond before disengagement becomes dropout.

Over time, another insight became visible: retention is not just about preventing children from leaving, it is about creating conditions that make staying worthwhile. That may mean academic support. Sometimes it means emotional support. Sometimes nutrition. Sometimes technology. Often, it is simply trust. If access was the education challenge of one generation, sustained engagement may be the challenge of the next.

The question then becomes: **If every child is technically in school, are we paying enough attention to whether they are actually remaining connected to learning?**

Over three years, across three volumes and over 70 grassroots conversations while building JEET, we've observed India's education landscape from the ground up. This series distills what works, what sustains, and what continues to challenge meaningful education at scale.

14.7%

Learning Loss

Students in Std. III unable to read Std. II text despite being enrolled (ASER trend signal).

60%

Teacher Adoption

Teaching staff usage observed where structured digital support became integrated into classrooms.