



India and the U.K.: Crafting a new legacy

Areas of cooperation

1. Despite the challenge posed by the Ukraine crisis, the India-U.K. relationship has been on an upward trajectory, exemplified by the conclusion of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership on May 4, 2021.
2. England highlighted the importance of developing deeper ties between Britain and India in the Indo-Pacific which would not only result in job creation but also foster security in the region.
3. Recent meets also furthered talks on defence-related trade and deepening cyber security and defence cooperation between the two countries.
4. A new joint cyber security programme is set to be announced, which aims to protect online infrastructure in India and the U.K. as both parties attempt to carry out joint exercises to combat threats from cybercriminals and ransomware.
5. India and the U.K. also plan to hold the first Strategic Tech Dialogue, a ministerial-level summit on emerging technologies.

The UK in Indo pacific:

1. Additionally, the U.K. and India have agreed to strengthen their cooperation in the maritime domain as the U.K. will join India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative and become a major partner on maritime security issues in Southeast Asia.
2. India is a key strategic partner for the U.K. in the Indo-Pacific both in terms of market share and defence, as was underscored by the signing of the Defence and International Security Partnership between India and the U.K. in 2015.
3. The U.K. is a regional power in the Indo-Pacific as it possesses naval facilities in Oman, Singapore, Bahrain, Kenya, and British Indian Ocean Territory.

New areas of cooperation

1. The U.K. has also confirmed £70 million of British International Investment funding to support the usage of renewable energy in India, which will help in building renewable energy infrastructure and developing solar power in the region.

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2. For Britain, a successful conclusion of an FTA with India would provide a boost to its 'Global Britain' ambitions as the U.K. has sought to expand its markets beyond Europe since Brexit.
3. Britain has been trying to seize opportunities in the growing economies of the Indo-Pacific to cement its place on the global stage as a serious global actor.

A unique moment

As India seeks to carve out a new role for itself in the evolving global order as a 'leading power' and the U.K. recalibrates its strategic outlook post-Brexit, this is a unique moment in India-U.K. ties.

State of adolescent learning

ASER highlights the dismal picture of online education

Universal Enrolment:

1. Over the last few decades in India, there has been a massive government drive to push for universal enrolment, extending to secondary as well as primary school children.
2. Successive Annual Status of Education Reports (ASER) have shown that this drive has been largely successful for both age groups, with high enrolment rates even during the pandemic.
3. Despite two years of COVID-related school closures, the increase in unenrolled 11–14-year-olds has been marginal, while the number of out-of-school 15–16-year-olds has actually fallen, for both boys and girls.
4. This indicates that schools have been able to retain children beyond primary school. This is remarkable, because children are now enrolled beyond the age of compulsory education, and enrolment rates show almost no gender disparity. But enrolment is only one piece of the puzzle.

Absence of formal learning

1. Although efforts have been made by parents, teachers and governments, learning at home through online education during the pandemic has been far from successful for these children. ASER 2020 and 2021 brought to light a dismal picture of access to technology-based learning resources.

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2. Even though over 70% of children in Classes IX to XII had a smartphone at home, only about 35% of them could use it for studies at all times, while 17% could not use it at all. In the absence of formal schooling, family members often assumed the task of teaching.
3. The ASER reports show adolescents did not fare well — older children received less learning support than younger ones.
4. Additionally, some children — especially older girls — faced competing demands due to financial stress and increased requirement of care work at home.

Care burden on girl child affected education:

1. Even in 2017, ASER had reported that almost 90% of female youth aged 14-18 did housework on a daily basis, compared to three-fourths of male youth.
2. According to the Building Back Better report by UNICEF, school closures exacerbated girls' and women's unpaid care work, limiting the time available to learn at home.
3. During COVID-19, girls might have had to replace the work done by the missing caregiver, or simply because of gendered expectations. ASER 2021 data hints at the same.
4. When asked if any child in the household above 12 years of age had started helping out more with household chores since the lockdown, almost two-thirds of the respondents reported in the affirmative.
5. In all age categories, girls were more likely than boys to be taking on this additional burden. For example, about three-quarters of 15-year-old girls had started helping out more with chores since the lockdown, a figure which was more than 10 percentage points higher than 15-year-old boys.

Gender disparity

1. Gender disparity at home may have been aggravated in the pandemic, but it is not new. ASER 2017 had found that 14–18-year-old youth's aspirations were gendered, with most male youth mentioning 'Army/Police' and 'Engineer', while female youth preferred 'Teacher' and 'Doctor/Nurse' as their occupation.

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2. The kind of work children did during lockdowns shows that they are exposed to gendered expectations from a young age.
3. A study using ASER, India Human Development Survey and National Family Health Survey data suggest that long before the pandemic, gender disparity had started spilling over into learning outcomes too.
4. The study found that female disadvantage persists in mathematics learning outcomes over the last decade, and shows no signs of disappearing.
5. The study correlates this finding with “regressive household practices” that limit the autonomy of women (such as veiling of the face by women, and the practice of women eating after men), and finds that female disadvantage in mathematics learning is higher where there is a higher prevalence of such practices.

Way Forward:

1. All of this points to an imminent need to integrate gender sensitisation modules into curricula for adolescents' education. School-based gender sensitisation programmes can play a transformative role in ensuring that all children get an equitable environment to grow.
2. For example, an attitude change programme in Haryana run by Breakthrough and evaluated by the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) showed promising results, with participants exhibiting gender-equitable behaviours even two years after the programme ended.
3. It was centred around interactive classroom discussions about gender equality in secondary schools. Scaling up such programmes for all schools and States could help bring about more gender-progressive views among communities.

With schools reopening, a gender-equitable environment for their growth should be prioritised. As the world begins to recover from the effects of the pandemic, this is an opportunity to rebuild better — one which should not be missed.