School Distance, Safe Access and the Right to Education

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Why in the News

Enrolment and safe daily access to school are different. A 27 October report linked student travel in the first National Household Travel Survey, NHTS, to neighbourhood schools and the right to education. NSO's original factsheet records journeys of at least one kilometre to basic-course institutions for 60.6% of students aged 6-14. This is an access-policy indicator, not automatically an RTE violation rate.

What Is a Neighbourhood School?

The Education Ministry's Samagra Shiksha implementation framework says Section 6 of the RTE Act requires schools within prescribed neighbourhood limits. Under Section 38, the appropriate government makes rules. State and Union territory notifications therefore matter.

One- and three-kilometre limits: Central rules prescribe walking distances of one kilometre for Classes I-V and three kilometres for VI-VIII. The framework explains that these central standards apply to Union territories without legislatures; states and other Union territories notify rules according to their needs. They are not one nationwide legal standard without checking state rules.

Geography and disability: Central rules allow adjustments for difficult terrain, floods, landslides, missing roads and dangers along children's routes. They also mention suitable, safe transport for children with disabilities. The goal is real access, not distance on a map alone.

What Did NHTS Record?

NSO conducted the survey from July 2025 to June 2026. MoSPI's 5 October release lists 14,274 villages, 10,377 urban blocks, 4,92,023 households and 20,34,371 people. Trips below one kilometre were excluded. Education trips concern basic-course institutions, not private tuition or coaching.

- **Ages 6-14:** At least one-kilometre institutional travel: rural 59.0%, urban 64.4%, all India 60.6%.
- **Ages 15-29:** Rural 79.1%, urban 73.3%, all India 77.0%. This is not exclusively higher-education enrolment.
- **Walking:** Among 6-14-year-olds making such recorded trips, 47.3% primarily walked. This is not 47.3% of all children.

For students aged six and above making such trips during the reference period, average monthly round-trip expenditure was ₹361 in rural areas and ₹617 in urban areas, including household-borne travel costs. These cover all such ages, not primary pupils alone.

Why 60.6% Is Not Direct Evidence of Legal Violation

Age is not class: Ages 6-14 include primary and upper-primary students. Legal distances depend on class and state rules, so a one-kilometre test for everyone is wrong.

Chosen school is not available school: Attendance farther away does not prove no nearby school exists. Quality, medium, preference and other reasons need investigation; neither should all long journeys be assumed voluntary.

Travel measurement is not legal access: The factsheet does not establish safe walking routes, nearest-school distance, admission availability or adequacy of special support. It starts an inquiry rather than settles one.

Way Forward

The source article's analysis favours joint school mapping and actual-route assessment by education and transport departments. A nearby school may remain inaccessible across a

river, an unbridged road or a dangerous junction. Urban traffic and cost can obstruct even short distances.

First check class-wise availability against state-notified standards. Then assess actual routes, time and modes locally. Examine access for the most affected children before closing or consolidating schools. Samagra Shiksha also says consolidation must not violate any child's neighbourhood-standard access right.

Safe footpaths, crossings, cycling and reliable transport can help according to local needs. A bus is not everywhere a substitute for a local school. Disability and difficult terrain require assessment beyond averages.

Related reading below explains NHTS definitions, worker travel and transport expenditure.

Mains Practice Question

"Access to school is not merely a question of distance but of effective implementation of the right to education." Discuss using NHTS findings and the neighbourhood-school framework. (GS-II, 15 marks, 250 words)

Answer Outline

Introduction:

Distinguish school availability from real access.

Main Body:

Cover class-wise, state-specific rules; the 60.6% indicator for ages 6-14; rural-urban differences; route safety, expense and disability. Explain that the survey proves neither nearest-school absence nor a violation rate.

Conclusion:

Combine school maps, local travel assessment and safe-access planning.

Sources and Limitations

Sources are the Education Ministry's Samagra Shiksha framework, paragraphs 2.4.3-2.4.7; MoSPI's original NHTS factsheet; and its 5 October 2026 press release and tables. The news discussion was on 27 October, but survey release was 5 October. Any state-level legal conclusion requires current state rules and school-level evidence.

- NHTS: India's Daily and Overnight Travel Figures
- Education Ministry: Samagra Shiksha framework, paragraphs 2.4.3-2.4.7
- MoSPI: Original NHTS factsheet
- MoSPI: Original press release and tables, 5 October 2026