

An analysis on political economy of health and education expenditure in India

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Abstract

Public expenditure is often influenced by an array of factors of which political considerations are significant. The sectors a government gives priorities will determine its growth and development path. The present study focuses on the political economy of health and education sectors from Fiscal Year 2009–10 to Fiscal Year 2023–24. It deals with how health and education spending is impacted by shifts in political power at the union government level. The study examines in detail how the trends and patterns of health and education spending have changed over the past 15 years in tandem with changing political power. The study uses descriptive analysis and as per the findings, The National Democratic Alliance (NDA I) and NDA II periods showed a different spending pattern in comparison with United Progressive Alliance (UPA II).

1. Introduction

Public expenditure is influenced by a range of factors, among which political considerations play a crucial role, alongside revenue dynamics and the broader economic position of a

country. Political priorities often shape budget allocations, determining which sectors receive funding based on governance objectives, electoral commitments, and ideological perspectives. Similarly, the availability of fiscal resources—determined by tax revenues, intergovernmental transfers, and borrowing capacity—affects expenditure decisions. In addition to that the, macroeconomic conditions, including growth trends, inflation rates, and external shocks, further influence the government's spending behaviour and fiscal policy stance.

Over time, public spending has been crucial to the development of both people and physical capital. The size and pattern of public spending has great relevance in the growth process and in the reduction of economic disparities in any nation. The pressure on public expenditure is particularly higher in developing economies because of growing population and it is an effective policy instrument in this context S. V. Seshaiah et al. (2018).

In addition to safeguarding people and property, government funding is essential for building the physical infrastructure needed to boost economic activity and create job possibilities as well as for supplying social infrastructure that enables people to find gainful employment. Public expenditure reflects the priorities and ideological inclinations of a government. A government's aims and ideological leanings are reflected in its public spending. The makeup and patterns of government spending in India provide important information about how different governments have handled problems including infrastructure, welfare, defence, and economic growth.

This study analyses the social sector expenditure in India from 2009–10 to 2023–24. This time period that spans the second term of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA-II) and the two successive terms of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). Therefore, the study compares the social sector expenditure, especially health and education expenditure during various tenures of the government. It also verifies whether the expenditure is moving along with growth levels in the country

An examination of government spending from 2008–09 to 2023–24 reveals a change in priorities by the government. Defence, security, agriculture, health, social welfare, education, and infrastructure that enhances quality of life are the areas where public expenditures are most frequently spent. During this period there have been considerable challenges for the government finances including as the demonetization and introduction of the GST, over the quintennial period from 2008-09 to 2023-24.

India experienced a significant economic boom and annual growth rate of 7.74 percent during the UPA administration's tenure from 2004 to 2013. The GDP has increased at a rate of 5.57 percent annually during two consecutive period of NDA government. Between 2004 and 2013, the global economy grew at 4 percent, but between 2014 and 2023, it only grew at about 3%. The data indicates that the Indian economy is lagging behind the rest of the globe throughout both the UPA and NDA eras.

Central government expenditure which was about 11 percent of GDP in 2000-2001 increased to 12.4 percent in 2009-2010, but thereafter declined to 10.6 percent in 2015–2016. A major part of the increase after 2008–2009 was seen in the revenue expenditures mainly during the pre-election time when the incumbent government decided to revise the pay scales of government employees. Besides the farm loan waiver and expansion of the rural employment guarantee programme from 200 districts to the whole country inflated the expenditure. Therefore, the present study compares the pattern of education and health spending of various government regimes.

2. Related literature:

The linkage between government expenditure and economic development has been a topic of discussion for over a long period of time. Public expenditure influences economic activity, maintains the distribution of income, and achieve overall structural transformation. Especially in the Indian context numerous studies have attempted to draw inferences from the growth implications of expenditure patterns, though the findings have been largely mixed and varied according to political economy factors, major economic events and so on.

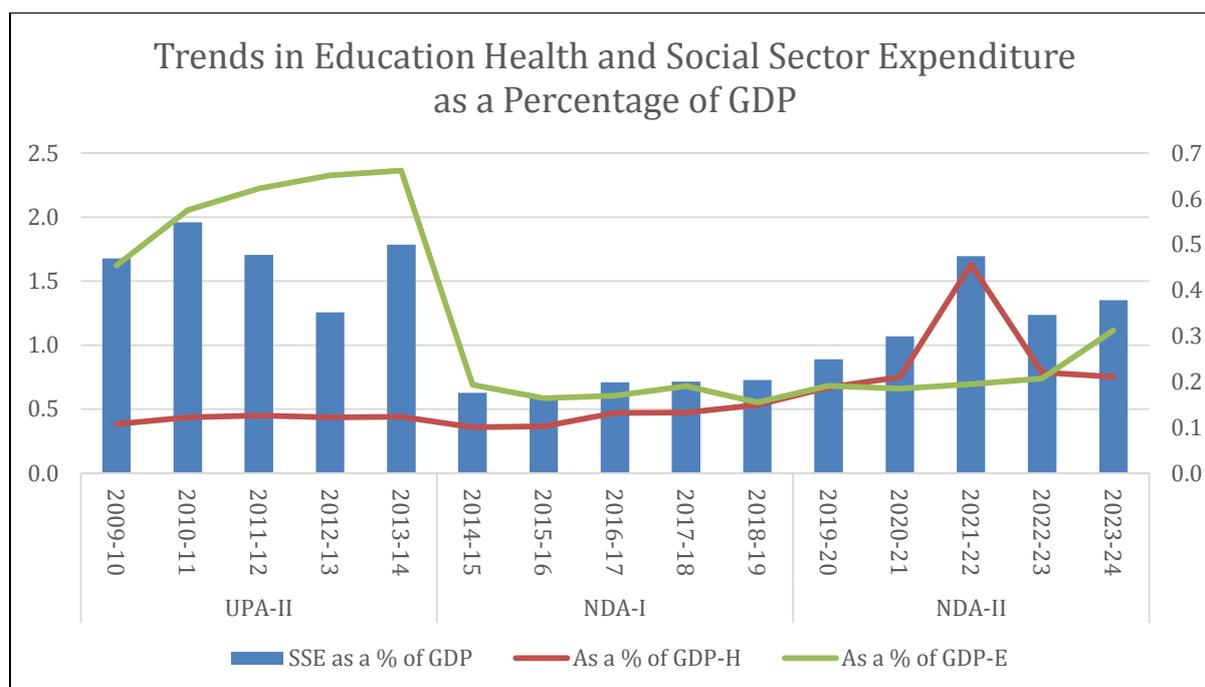
India's growth path has several impediments. According to Sen et al. (2014) sustained rapid economic growth cannot be found in developing countries and India's growth acceleration ended in 2010 and unimproved institutions cause the country's growth pattern to reverse. Persisting corruption is also an important factor hindering growth of the country. Public spending has an important role in economic growth and development of a nation. The impacts of government spending on economic growth largely depends on what the government spends its money on, and how well the institutional mechanism established to manage expenditure works in delivering value for money Favaro and Lahiri (2006). The total public expenditure had a positive long-term effect on GDP Gangal and Gupta (2013). However, empirically there are ambiguous results, and for instance, the relation between the share of total government expenditure in GDP and the growth in per capita real GDP and find

negative and significant relationship between the two Devarajan, et al. (1996). An increased central government expenditure in India, aligned with the expanding focus on particularly the social and developmental service Gulati (1961).

There are various factors influence the level of public spending in India. However, according to Muralidharan (2024), the Fundamental problem with India's public finance system is not just the lack of resources, but the inefficacy in how those resources is spent. He highlights the need to shift the policy focus from increasing budgetary allocations to improving the quality of spending. A major portion - almost fifty percent of public spending is to cover the committed expenses such as pensions, salaries and interest payments. These expenses to honour the past commitments are large costs for the government and limit the funds available for essential spending. Especially in the Indian context, the spending noticeably exceeds revenue and majority of the spending is financed by borrowing. Public expenditure in India is driven by various factors, and political factors are one of the most important among them.

3. Descriptive analysis:

The following section presents a detailed analysis of the trends and patterns in social sector expenditure in India over the period 2009–10 to 2023–24. This section shows how successive governments have allocated resources to key areas such as health, education, and whether priorities of the changing governments are reflected on the budgetary allocations. To understand the political economy of social sector spending especially health and education expenditure, the present compares expenditure patterns under the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) and the first and second National Democratic Alliance (NDA) regimes.



(Source : Union Budget - Ministry of Finance. Government of India)

The data presented reflects trends in Social Sector Expenditure, Education Expenditure, and Health Expenditure from 2009–10 to 2023–24. Overall, all three categories show a general increase over the 15-year period, although with notable fluctuations in some years.

Social Sector Expenditure, which encompasses government spending on welfare-related programs, spending on sectors that directly affect the well-being and quality of life of people, especially the poor and vulnerable sections of society. Official data shows an overall increasing trend from Rs.1, 28,384.10 crores in 2009-10 to Rs.2, 38,202.28 crores in 2023-24. The expenditure peaked in 2021-22 at Rs.2, 54,696.87 crores, reflecting pandemic-related social spending. The substantial increase after 2019–20 is linked to enhanced welfare focus due to COVID-19 and its aftermath. However, there were notable dips in 2012–13 (Rs.1, 15,710 crores) and again during 2014–16 (reaching as low as Rs.66, 137.94 crores in 2014–15).

Education expenditure:

Education Expenditure (general education) has followed a relatively steady upward trajectory with minor fluctuations. It rose from Rs.34, 757.25 crores in 2009-10 to Rs.55, 215.06 crores in 2023–24. The sector saw a consistent rise from 2009-10 to 2013-14, peaking at Rs.64,839.84 crores, then a steep fall in 2014–15 to Rs.20,354.15 crores. Under UPA, the expenditure on education had risen in 2009-10 to 2013-14. In 2014-15, that is the first year of

first NDA tenure, the Government drastically reduced its spending on education. This reduction is attributed to the NDA government's reported plan to make significant cuts to social sector funding in 2014-15 in an effort to lower the fiscal deficit. Moreover, the expenditure on education witnessed a steady increase from 2015-16 to 2018-19. Post-2016, it gradually recovered and continued to rise, crossing Rs.50, 000 crores again by 2023–24.

Furthermore, The **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020** has significantly influenced India's expenditure patterns by prioritizing increased investment in education, especially foundational literacy, digital learning, and vocational training. The strategy plans to boost the country's public spending on education from 4.4 percent of India's GDP to 6 percent. According to the Analysis of Budgeted Expenditure on Education from 2018-19 to 2020-21, the total spending on education as a percentage of GDP has been on the rise, reaching 4.64 for the year 2020-21. Rs. 50,077.95 crore is allocated to the Department of Higher Education. The allocation for the PM Schools for Rising India (PM SHRI) initiative has been raised by Rs 1,450 crore.

During the UPA term significant investments were made in expanding access to education and improving infrastructure. Under Modi, focus has been on improving the quality of education, skill development, additionally digital learning initiatives. Both governments have allocated similar proportions of GDP to education, with the UPA slightly ahead in terms of average expenditure. However, NDA has given emphasize to quality and skill development more prominently.

Health sector expenditure:

Health Expenditure exhibits a strong growth trend, especially in the last five years. From a modest Rs.8, 220.99 crores in 2009–10, it has increased to Rs.37, 231.56 crores by 2023–24. The most significant jump occurred in 2021–22, with expenditure rising to Rs.68, 526.76 crores, nearly double the previous year's spending. This surge clearly depicts the emergency responses to COVID-19 pandemic, including vaccination drives, hospital capacity expansions, and public health programs. Although spending reduced slightly in subsequent years, it has remained much higher than the pre-pandemic level, indicating a lasting shift in public health prioritization.

The Economic Survey specifies that although the pandemic has affected almost all social services, yet the health sector was the worst hit out of all. The overall expenditure in the

health care sector in 2021-22 shows an increasing trend compared to the previous years. As mentioned before, significant expenditures were made in healthcare infrastructure as a result of the COVID 19 pandemic, such as increasing the capacity of hospitals, improving testing and treatment facilities, and implementing immunization campaigns. During this time Rs. 2, 23,846 crore was allocated for investment in Health Infrastructure. The government allocated Rs 64,180 for the Pradhan Mantri Ayushman Bharat Health Infrastructure Mission (PM-ABHIM) which includes support for rural and urban health and welfare centres, National Institute for Virology, setting up of national institute for One Health, Health Emergency Operation Centres, mobile hospitals. The ministry allocated Rs. 35,000 crore for COVID 19 Vaccination.

The profound economic downturn following the global pandemic and lockdown significantly disrupted NDA-II regime. Additionally, an economic slowdown already pronounced during NDA-I, exacerbated by the successive policy shocks of demonetization and GST rollout. The UPA era, too, sailed through the challenges of the global financial crisis and the ensuing worldwide recession in 2008-09, representing a significant external shock.

4. Total expenditure as a percentage of GDP:

During the 2009-10 to 2013-14 UPA administration, total spending increased from 13.39 percent to 15.91 percent of GDP. The global financial crisis of 2008 left fiscal stimulus in place throughout the early 2010s. In the early years of UPA II, there were significant fiscal deficits as a result of spending being permitted to increase regardless of revenue. The increase in spending shortly after the global financial crisis of 2008 was thus justified.

The NDA commenced with fiscal consolidation in mind but the COVID-19 pandemic led to emergency spending, pushing the deficit to an unprecedented level. NDA-I (2014–15 to 2018–19) Expenditure percentage of GDP remained stable around 15.75-16.54 percent. During the Modi government, spending on subsidies has increased by almost 58 per cent to Rs 4.03 lakh crore in FY24 from Rs 2.55 lakh crore in FY14.

The fiscal stimulus during COVID-19 under the NDA 2 regime (Modi government's second term) significantly altered India's expenditure patterns, shifting focus toward immediate relief, social protection, and economic revival. The Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY), worth Rs.1.75 lakh crore (0.8 percent of GDP), emphasized direct benefit transfers, free food grains, and employment support, particularly targeting the vulnerable

sections of society. This led to a sharp increase in the total spending. Additionally, the introduction of the Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan, with a cumulative package of Rs.20 lakh crore, influenced expenditure patterns by expanding allocations across agriculture, MSMEs, infrastructure, and credit support. With the exception of a pandemic-driven rise in 2020–21, subsidies have been making up a smaller portion of overall spending during the Modi administration's tenure since 2014-15. Subsidies as a percentage of total government spending have since resumed their downward trend. Actually, the expenses of demonetization are calculated to be around Rs 1.27 lakh crore for the economy. This includes a decrease in GDP worth approximately Rs 1.1 lakh crore, considering the average decline in GDP growth of 0.63 percent, the GDP size of 2.5 trillion USD, and an exchange rate of Rs 70. Additionally, there is a cost of Rs 17,000 crore for the government and the RBI to carry out the demonetization procedure in India.

5. Social sector expenditure as a percentage of GDP:

During the UPA administration, the proportion of GDP spent on the social sector remained relatively constant from 2009-10 to 2013-14. In line with the NCMP, the UPA Government has implemented a number of populist measures in the education and health, notably the establishment of the education cess to support the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and the mid-day meal program as well as the launch of the National Rural Health Mission. The government set aside Rs 1, 26,312 crore for important flagship initiatives in 2011-2012. Prime Minister's Gramin Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) were the programs with the greatest expenditures.

In the first term of the NDA government, the total share of Social Sector Expenditure as a percentage of GDP fell dramatically. The previous UPA government maintained the percentage between 1.95 percent to 1.25 percent, the NDA administration saw a steep fall in the percentage, without attaining to 1 percent. Despite the fact that the percentage fell from 1.78 percent to 0.60 percent during the first year of the NDA government, a significant decline from the previous UPA administration, the share increased slightly to 0.72 percent in 2018-19 whereas the largest share constituted in the financing, insurance, real estate, & business services. Over the years, the share of social sector spending in total Union government expenditure has stagnated, as a result of change in political parties in power and shift in spending properties of the government.

From 2014-15 to 2018-19, MGNREGA saw a steady rise in fund allocation and expenditure, with allocations increasing from Rs.37, 588 crore to Rs.58, 404 crore. Expenditure followed a similar trend, peaking at Rs.63, 646 crore in 2017-18. In 2015-16 and 2016-17, spending exceeded allocations, highlighting high demand. However, the utilization rate declined in later years, it has faced several limitations that have prevented it from achieving its full potential as a poverty reduction program, to provide livelihood security. These include lack of adequate funds, corruption, administrative delays, and inefficiencies in wage distribution.

The NDA administration's second term, from 2019-20 to 2023-24, saw an increase in the proportion of social sector expenditure to the GDP, but it was less than that of the UPA government. In contrast, since FY20, the government's spending on social services has been growing. The share has increased to 1.3 percent in 2023–24 with the introduction of numerous programs such as the Jal Jeevan Mission (Water Life Mission), the Atal Vayo Abhyuday Yojana (AVYAY), and the SHRESHTA: Residential Education Scheme for High School Students, which offers grants to students from underprivileged backgrounds. As a result, the social sector saw a significant expansion during the NDA II regime.

6. Social sector expenditure as percentage of total expenditure:

The Indian National Congress-led UPA II administration (2009-10 to 2013-14) showed a great commitment to social welfare by dramatically raising Social Sector Expenditure (SSE). In 2013-14, SSE reached a remarkable height of Rs.1.75 lakh crore, indicating a steady rising trend. Social expenditures were strong as a percentage of GDP, often surpassing 1.7 percent, while this proportion of overall government spending ranged between 12 percent and 14 percent on average. These numbers demonstrate how highly the government prioritizes social expenditures.

The Expenditure that Grew consistently under **UPA II** demonstrating a strong relative commitment to welfare, declined dramatically with the start of **NDA I**, dropped to historic lows during their regime. SSE had a huge decline in 2014–15, decreasing to over ₹66,000 crore, which was a considerable decline from the highest levels reported during the previous UPA II administration. Even if developmental demands increased during the following years, this investment was largely unchanged. This significant cut indicates that social welfare programs were given less emphasis.

During the NDA II regime (2019-20 to 2023-24), under the continued leadership of the BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Social Sector Expenditure (SSE) restored some of this ratio particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. SSE experienced strong growth, peaking at Rs.2.54 lakh crore in 2021–22 a level significantly higher than in previous years. Due to the pressing need to improve livelihoods, enhance healthcare systems, and broaden social safety nets during the pandemic, social spending as a proportion of GDP had a significant recovery in 2021–2022, rising to 1.7 percent. SSE as a percentage of overall government spending also saw a little improvement that year, rising to 6.7 percent. However, regardless of this recovery, these figures still remain well below the levels seen during the UPA II period, when social spending consistently accounted for over 12 percent of total expenditure. This indicates that while the NDA II government increased SSE in response to an extraordinary crisis, the overall budgetary prioritization of the social sector has not returned to earlier highs.

7. Health & education expenditure as a percentage of GDP:

The health expenditure appears to be uniform but doesn't increase to 1 percent. The health sector accounted for a sizable portion of the economy in 2021–22, with 0.45 percent of the GDP during the NDA II administration. According to IMF Annual Article IV, India can boost human capital productivity by investing in education and healthcare. The proportion of education spending as a percentage of GDP, on the other hand, is at its highest in 2013-14 with 0.66% during the UPA administration. The COVID-19 epidemic led to a rise in the percentage of health expenditure in 2021–22 in order to mitigate the pandemic's consequences. Despite the economic difficulties of COVID 19, the government has maintained a consistent level of share when compared to prior years.

In terms of the share of education spending as a percentage of GDP, the UPA administration outperformed the NDA administration, with 0.66 percent of GDP in 2013-14, which was the highest percentage during the UPA era, compared to 0.19 percent and 0.31 percent as the highest in NDA I and II, respectively. In accordance with the recommendations of the 14th Finance Commission, the government has adjusted the sharing pattern of central schemes in crucial sectors, such as secondary and higher education, since 2016-17, with reduced budget allocations and more direct transfers. This would have slightly reduced the overall education expenditure. The percentage of education decreased to 0.19 percent in the first year of the

NDA administration and to 0.15 percent in 2018–19. The Modi government's first term saw a significant amount of underfunding.

8. Health and education expenditure as a percentage of social sector expenditure:

The spending in the social sector along with improvements in society and infrastructure, India's economy has expanded in recent years. With the introduction of schemes like the National Vocational Education Qualification Framework (NVQF), which focused on polytechnics, engineering colleges, and other universities, the proportion of educational spending under the UPA government increased significantly, with 51 percent in 2012-13. Rs 25,555 crore was allotted to RTE, and Rs 3,124 crore was allocated to the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan during the period. The year's allocations are favourable for the education sector. With 30.77 percent as the highest, it decreased during the first NDA period. The subsequent picture is one of collapse, with the percentage falling to 11 percent between 2021 and 2022.

The health sector's proportion remained relatively stable under the UPA government. When considering both the NDA administrations that introduced AB-PMJAY and several other programs, the NDA term had a higher share of up to 20 percent in 2018-19.

The average GDP growth rate under Narendra Modi's leadership has been roughly 6.8 percent year over year since 2014. Even though the economy grew rapidly at first, demonetization, the introduction of the GST, and the COVID-19 pandemic have all had an impact on overall performance. From 2004 to 2014, when Dr. Manmohan Singh was in office, the Indian economy grew at an average annual GDP growth rate of roughly 7.7 percent. Due to increased foreign investments, liberalization policies, and a thriving services sector, the economy expanded strongly during this time. The GDP grew more on average during Manmohan Singh's term than during Modi's. Modi's administration has, nevertheless, concentrated on structural changes meant to build a longer-lasting, more robust economy. The percentage in the first term of the NDA government varied from 15.9 percent to 20.4 percent, while the second term of the Modi government saw an increase in the share in the fiscal year 2021–22, with 26.9 percent being necessary to address the pandemic crisis. However, at the conclusion of the term, the percentage had dropped significantly to 15.6 percent. India only has 0.9 beds for every 1000 people, according to the National Health Profile, and only 30 percent of these beds are located in rural regions.

9. Does growth move along with public spending in India?

Over time, both GDP and constant spending have generally increased. From Rs.10.96 lakh crore in 2009–10 to Rs.20.47 lakh crore in 2023–24, expenditures rose. In the same time frame, GDP increased from Rs.76.51 lakh crore to Rs.176.50 lakh crore. Even though GDP growth was moderate in 2020–21, there was a significant increase in constant expenditure (Rs.23.33 lakh crore), which was caused by fiscal stimulus and expenditures in the social sector brought on by the epidemic.

A high positive link is seen by a correlation coefficient of 0.903 between constant GDP and constant spending. This implies that steady government spending tends to rise in pace with GDP and vice versa. Although there have been times, like in 2020–21, when expenditure growth exceeded GDP because of exceptional circumstances. The correlation's strength.

10. Conclusion:

The average GDP growth rate during NDA regime has been roughly 6.8 percent year over year since 2014. Although the economy grew rapidly at first, demonetization, the introduction of the GST and the COVID-19 pandemic have all had an impact on overall performance. Between 2004 and 2014, when UPA was in power, the Indian economy grew at an average annual GDP growth rate of almost 7.7 percent. A thriving services sector, more foreign investments, and liberalization measures all contributed to the strong economic growth of this century. Compared to NDA's term, the average GDP grew more during UPA's tenure. Nonetheless, NDA administration has prioritized structural changes meant to build a longer-lasting, more robust economy. Under the UPA, the Plan allocation went up in 2012-13 and by 2014-15, the BJP Govt had reduced the Plan allocation for 2015-16. The cuts are brutal across the board: the flagship Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan has seen a 22.14 percent reduction, the Mid-Day Meal Scheme's budget has been cut by 16.41 percent, the Rashtriya Madhyama Shiksha Abhiyan for secondary education has been reduced by 28.7%, and the Rashtriya Uchhatar Shiksha Abhiyan, which supports state colleges, has been cut by 48 percent. In the case of SSA, MHRD has asked for Rs 50,000 crore in 2015-16 but received only Rs 22,000.

The need for significant investments in healthcare for economic resilience was highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the COVID-19 era, health spending is seen as crucial for equitable and sustainable economic growth, with a stronger focus on long-term health system

strengthening and readiness. While economic downturns make health spending worse, future sustainable economic growth and health depend on focused policy interventions and an emphasis on creating resilient health systems.

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Appendix:

	Years	SSE as a % of GDP	As a % of GDP-H	As a % of GDP-E
UPA-II	2009-10	1.678	0.107	0.454
	2010-11	1.959	0.122	0.575
	2011-12	1.706	0.126	0.622
	2012-13	1.256	0.122	0.651
	2013-14	1.784	0.123	0.662
NDA-I	2014-15	0.628	0.100	0.193
	2015-16	0.603	0.102	0.164
	2016-17	0.709	0.132	0.169
	2017-18	0.715	0.133	0.190
	2018-19	0.727	0.149	0.155
NDA-II	2019-20	0.888	0.188	0.191
	2020-21	1.069	0.210	0.185
	2021-22	1.696	0.456	0.195
	2022-23	1.237	0.221	0.207
	2023-24	1.350	0.211	0.313