

Education: Panchayat and Decentralisation

Myths and Reality

Since the 1950s, primary school education has seen a significant decline across certain regions of West Bengal. In this paper that focuses on three districts of the state, the sorry state of affairs that prevails in the panchayati system is largely to blame for the debacle. Panchayati raj institutions, instead of spearheading the decentralisation of the educational process, became a tool in the hands of the major political parties, which sought to implement populist policies like 'no detention' rather than bringing in a thorough revamp of the entire system.

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The failure to make the country literate as stipulated in the Indian Constitution prompted the union and state governments to undertake various planning strategies for fulfilling the constitutional directives. One of them is the strategy of so-called decentralisation of educational management through the panchayati raj. In fact, Indian Constitution has been amended to facilitate this. According to the 73rd and 74th Amendments of Indian Constitution the panchayats have been conceived to be the third layer of government and are supposed to be entrusted with the responsibility of implementing universal and compulsory free education. Different international agencies like World Bank, UNDP, UNICEF, European Commission, etc. in many ways encouraged and persuaded the government of India towards decentralising educational management through panchayati raj and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The panchayati raj has been looked as the main agency for decentralising developmental administration.

In fact, panchayati raj has been visualised by our planners and politicians as to be the panacea of many ills endemic in Indian administration and polity. In a way, central and state level authorities are now trying to shirk or shift their responsibilities to the panchayati raj, rather in an irresponsible way. It is interesting to note that while the constitutional amendments seek to create panchayati raj as the third layer of government to ensure grass roots involvement in developmental programmes, these do not take note that the measures, in fact, violate the principle on which the entire

Indian administrative structure stands. Indian administration developed and grew on the principle of centralised, accountable and impersonal structure as opposed to or contrary to the decentralised indigenous system of Indian village society [Stokes 1992]. This centralised and impersonal system of administration as was developed by the colonial power had been based on the positivist principle which considered the masses as objects to be developed. On the other hand, decentralisation and panchayati raj does not carry any meaning without recognising the role of masses as subjects to decide their own affairs, to live according to their own definition. The inherent dichotomy has been totally ignored while amending the Indian Constitution for creating the panchayati raj. In the existing structure of Indian administration, panchayati raj is only likely to play a subordinate vassal and dependent role without any organic spontaneity.

An attempt has been made in this paper to study the role of panchayati raj in carrying the task of universal elementary education; how far the management of education has been decentralised, and to what result. The study has been conducted in West Bengal as it is generally believed that panchayati raj has taken root there. In West Bengal, panchayat elections are held at regular intervals and panchayat bodies are duly formed. The state government allocates a definite sum of fund yearly, for the functioning of panchayats. However, panchayats hardly generate any substantial revenue income of its own. Panchayats are guided in almost all respects by the state government. There is hardly any space for

autonomous planning let alone independent planning.

It is interesting to note that in West Bengal, panchayats are not formally responsible for implementing the task of universal elementary education, not are they responsible for secondary or higher education. There is a separate body called District Primary School Council which is formally entrusted by the state government, for carrying on the task of universal primary education, at the district level. There is also a state level body above this – West Bengal Board of Primary Education. It is all the more interesting to note that universal elementary education is not in the agenda at all. State board or district councils are responsible for primary education only, while secondary education, class V onwards, is the responsibility of the Directorate of School Education and West Bengal Board of Secondary Education. Though class V is considered to be at the primary stage, primary schools in West Bengal are almost universally schools up to class IV. This is an anomaly which is inherent to Indian education. Elementary education of eight classes, has not been given the due attention all over the country despite the strong recommendation of CABE 1944, and directive principles in the Indian Constitution. It is strange that neither union government nor the state governments ever seriously took note of this anomaly, particularly, while planning for universal elementary education or making laws and rules for school education.

It may be true that when the primary education bills were mooted first in 1920s and the first comprehensive rural primary

education act was passed in 1930, in Bengal, the prevailing conditions were not really conducive for a programme of elementary education of eight years. But it was not the same when the Indian Constitution was framed. In the 1920s and 1930s, the level of literacy was appealingly low. There was hardly any literary ambience particularly, in villages. Demand for education was still to be felt universally. Besides, infrastructural facilities, particularly, the availability of qualified teachers was very limited. Under the circumstances, even universal primary education (UPE) appeared to be very difficult task let alone universal elementary education (UEE).

The situation, however, changed a lot by the 1960s. The primary education act of 1930, in fact, brought education into the political agenda in Bengal. Slowly but surely, an ambience for literacy was growing and the demand for education was catching up. Number of primary schools and students increased quite substantially, though primary education was yet to be universalised. It was during 1960s that a new thrust and change in educational planning was very much called for. Unfortunately, Indian administration failed to take up the challenge and the politicians started politicising education more than taking up mass education as a nation building agenda. It may sound queer but true that during the time though the number of teachers grew and their service security and pay protection found a place in the political agenda particularly, of opposition parties, the process of degeneration also set in.

Looking Back

For understanding the recent attempts for decentralising the management of primary or elementary education, it may be useful to have a look at the history of the process. Despite the fanfare with which the new strategy of decentralised educational management has been adopted, one may not find something fundamentally different in the new strategy. It was only in 1919, for the first time an act, for expanding and regulating the primary education was passed in Bengal. In fact, in the 1920s universal and compulsory free primary education was already in the agenda of educational discourse in Bengal. In 1921, district boards met in a conference and resolved that "the intention of making primary education free and compulsory as soon as possible be accepted as a directive idea" [Biss 1021:20]. ISSO Malley, the

director of public instruction appointed E E Biss to draw up a programme for the expansion and improvement of primary education in Bengal in 1920. Biss gave his report in 1921. That year the 1919 Act was amended to cover first all municipalities, and later union boards, under the Bengal Local Self Government Act of 1885. For long it remained a dead letter except in Calcutta corporation and Chittagong municipal areas. In 1927, a bill was mooted to make a comprehensive act covering entire rural Bengal. In 1930, a comprehensive act called Bengal (Rural) Primary Education Act came into existence with the provision for partially decentralising the system of primary education management [Sen 1941; Acharya 1996, 1998].

According to the provisions of the act a district level structure called district school boards separate from district boards, were to be constituted for extending the facilities of primary education in rural Bengal by establishing new schools where required, giving recognition and aid to

privately initiated schools, maintaining the schools, and managing the provident funds and other annuities of teachers. District school boards were entrusted to conduct surveys for ascertaining the requirements of primary education facilities of the district and also to appoint teachers according to the requirements. They were also authorised to levy education cess and make primary education compulsory where possible. However, union boards were made responsible for enforcing compulsion, in their jurisdictions, according to the provisions of the act. It was also expected that compulsion would be introduced within 10 years [Sen 1941; Acharya 1996, 1998].

It may be noted that district boards by then became elected bodies, though through limited franchise. On the other hand, the proposed district school boards were to be nominated official bodies, to begin with. This became a bone of contention as elected district boards opposed the formation of a separate body and that too a nominated body. District boards dominated mainly by

Table: 1 Progress of Primary Education in West Bengal
Classes I-IV (Primary Schools)

Item	1951-52	1961-62	1971-72	1981-82	1991-92	1999-2000
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Total population	24,810,308	34,929,279	44,312,011	54,580,647	68,078,000	77,972,000
Child population (6-11)	37,21,546	41,28,286	53,17,441*	65,49,677*	74,71,100	96,58,000@
No of primary schools (I-IV)	15,119	30,535	35,484	47,940+	50,827	52,385
No of primary scholars (I-IV)	14,87,389	28,43,302	43,34,160	66,63,325+	76,46,689	76,43,253@
No of Teachers	43,895	89,700	1,23,099	1,71,329+	1,84,748	1,50,546
Student-teacher ratio	34:1	32:1	35:1	40:1	41:1	51:1
Average no of teacher per school	2.9	2.9	3.5	3.6	3.6	2.9
Average no of scholars per school	98	93	122	139	150	146
Growth rate of child population (per cent)		+10.9	+29	+23	+14	+29.3
Growth rate of scholars (per cent)		+91.16	+52.43	+53.74	+14.75	-0.04
Growth rate of teachers (per cent)		+104.5	+37.2	+39.2	+7.8	-18.5
Growth rate of schools (per cent)		+101.96	+16.20	+35.10	+6.02	+3.07
Dropout in relation to class I enrolment to IV (per cent)	66.8	70.8	78+	73+	63+	50.9

Notes: * Child population for 1971-72 and 1981-82 have been calculated as 12 per cent of the total population.
+ Data for the year 1983-84, @ Data for 1997-98 + Dropout data for 1973, 1978 and 1993 respectively from All India Educational Survey.
Sources: (1) *Quinquennial Review on Progress of Education in West Bengal for the period 1947-48 to 1951-52, 1959, Kolkata.*
(2) *Septennial Review on the Progress of Education in West Bengal, for the period 1957 to 64, 1970, Kolkata.*
(3) *Statistical Hand Book, Government of West Bengal 1974, 1988 and 1998, Kolkata.*
(4) *Selected Educational Statistics, Government of India, 1991-92 and 1996-97, Delhi.*
(5) *Annual Report 1999-2000, Department of School Education, Government of West Bengal, Kolkata.*

Table 2: Standard of Teaching – Learning during Last Five Years

Respondents	Improved	Deteriorated	Remaining Same	Total
1	2	3	4	5
Guardians	23 (2.4)	803(85.1)	118(12.5)	944(100.0)
Teachers	47 (15.6)	199(65.9)	56(18.5)	302(100.0)
A C members	8 (8.9)	57 (63.3)	25 (27.8)	90 (100.0)
Panchayat members	5 (8.3)	11 (18.3)	44 (73.3)	60 (100.0)
School inspectors	5 (16.7)	24 (83.3)	1 (3.3)	30 (100.0)

Hindus who feared that it was a government ploy to undermine their influence as natural leaders of society. The Hindu members of district boards and also Hindu political leaders generally thought this to be an attempt to make Muslims educational leaders through the back door in an undemocratic way [Acharya 1998]. The other controversial issue was the introduction of a new education cess which the Hindu leaders, a majority of whom had zamindari or talukdary interests in land under permanent settlement, considered violation of their land rights [Acharya, *ibid*].

To monitor the functioning of the system, a provision was made that for every 100 schools there should be one sub-inspector of schools under the district inspectorates, which would be under the direct control of DPI. The sub-inspectors would visit schools at regular intervals to supervise the teaching and learning and to report to the district inspector of schools. District school boards would give recognition and aid only on the basis of these inspection reports. In fact, school inspectors played the intermediary role between the school, district and state level authorities. They played the role of a monitoring agency as well.

There was also provision for constituting a central primary education committee to prepare the curricula, arrange for giving approval to textbooks and for preparing policies for efficient functioning of primary education. Unlike the recent West Bengal Board of Primary Education, this committee did not have any administrative control over district school boards. They were more involved in academic policy planning. In March 1937, by a resolution the Bengal government constituted a committee to consider the curricula for primary education. This committee was of the opinion that English should not be taught in primary schools and primary sections of secondary schools [Sen 1941:327].

After independence in 1950, major amendments were made to the Bengal (Rural) Primary Education Act 1930, as a step towards achieving the goal of universal and compulsory primary education in West Bengal. It was provided that compulsion could be introduced "in any area lying within the jurisdiction of union boards, union committees or panchayats". It was also provided that "once a pupil in the rural area is admitted to class I of a primary or junior basic school, he or she must continue till the course is completed" [Acharya 1996].

According to the quinquennial review on the progress of education in West Bengal for the period 1947-48 to 1951-52, a 10-year scheme for the introduction of compulsory primary education in the rural areas made considerable progress during the period under review. Compulsion was introduced in 94 unions and 3,664 villages. The review also noted the difficulties in introducing compulsion. According to the review, "Parents and guardians often required the assistance of boys of school-going age in their work and this was made an excuse for non-attendance at school. There were indeed attendance committees and provision for penalty, but these local committees were seldom inclined to take strict measures against delinquents" [*Quinquennial Review* 1959:4,5]. One may note that the same is true even today and no political party is likely to take any such unpopular measure. However, it is also a fact that such measures violate the fundamental spirit of decentralisation which is based on the felt need of education. The entire policy of universal elementary education as has been conceived and pursued by our government is in fact, based on the principle of induced need. The problem is how to transform this 'induced need' to 'felt need' [Acharya 1999; Bhattacharyya 1991]. Panchayats in West Bengal have not been able to prove that they are worthy of the task. It is no wonder that the Hartog Committee and CABE of 1944, were strongly against decentralisation of administrative authority of education. Even B G Kher, who was the chairman of a committee for examining the relation between the state government and local bodies, was not

personally in favour of delegating the administrative authority of primary education to local bodies [Acharya 1999].

In 1963, the West Bengal Urban Primary Education Act was passed for introducing free and compulsory primary education in the municipal areas, but the progress towards free and compulsory primary education in municipal areas was anything but satisfactory. In 1964, only Khardah of 24 parganas district, and Jangipur of Murshidabad, introduced free and compulsory primary education in municipal areas, but only perfunctorily. Calcutta corporation introduced compulsion in five corporation wards even before 1963. According to the septennial review on the progress of education in West Bengal, for the period 1957 to 1963-64, only 81 per cent of the children in the age group 6-11 years, was attending school in the compulsory areas in 1963-64 as against 79.64 per cent in 1960-61. This was despite the fact that there was provision for supplying all the approved textbooks and writing materials, free of cost, to the needy children enrolled, which was considered to be 20 per cent of all the enrolled children [*Septennial Review*, 1970]. However, 68 per cent dropout and wastage made the enrolment figures meaningless, even if we take them at face value. Almost the same trend is still prevalent in the primary education scene in the country.

Government reports of the time took note of the failures in introducing free and compulsory primary education in rural areas as well as urban areas of West Bengal in the following terms: "But the local bodies to whom the task of organising and admin-

Table 3: How Are Village Schools Working during Last Five Years

Respondents 1	Regularly in Times 2	Irregularly 3	D K 4	Total 5
Guardians	167 (17.7)	777 (82.3)	–	944 (100.0)
AC members	32 (35.6)	58 (64.4)	–	90 (100.0)
Panchayat members	13 (21.7)	47 (78.3)	–	60 (100.0)

Table 4: Attendance of Teacher during Last Five Years

Respondents 1	Regular 2	Irregular 3	D K 4	Total 5
Guardians	270 (28.6)	674 (71.4)	–	944 (100.0)
AC members	32 (35.6)	58 (64.4)	–	90 (100.0)
Panchayat members	16 (26.7)	44 (73.3)	–	60 (100.0)

Table 5: Panchayat Interest in the Management of Schools

Respondents 1	Yes 2	No 3	D K 4	Total 5
Guardians	205 (21.7)	589 (62.4)	150 (15.9)	944 (100.0)
Teachers	70 (23.2)	211 (69.9)	21 (7.0)	302 (100.0)
AC members	33 (36.7)	56 (62.2)	1 (1.1)	90 (100.0)

istering primary education was entrusted, could not discharge their duty satisfactorily mainly because of party politics and communal dissension" [Quinquennial Review 1959]. It may be noted that the passage of the Bengal (Rural) Primary Education Bill into an Act in 1930, was not a smooth course. The provisions for separate district school boards and a new education cess were opposed and fought tooth and nail by the Hindu members of Bengal Council. The bill was in fact, passed in absence of almost all the Hindu members. This bill caused unprecedented communal turmoil. The question of political control over the education overshadowed the real purpose, i e, introduction of free and compulsory primary education. It is all the more strange that we did not take any lesson from history while making primary education acts in future for introducing universal and compulsory primary education in the state [Acharya 1998, 1999].

Incompatibility between Primary Education and Panchayat

After more than two decades of independence and several failures, the government of West Bengal passed the West Bengal Primary Education Act 1973, superseding all previous acts, to start anew for introducing free and compulsory primary education. One may note that still today, there is no act for introducing elementary education in West Bengal. The new act provided for constituting state and district level authorities for primary education, such as West Bengal Primary Education Board at the state level and District Primary School Council (DPSC) at the district level. Both the board and councils would be elected-cum-nominated bodies. However, no election has been held till today for constituting these bodies. In fact, in 1987, by an amendment in the said act, the usual practice of nominated ad hoc bodies have been regularised. No doubt, these nominated bodies were composed largely, of the followers of the ruling political parties. In the process the politicisation of primary education of an worst kind was complete, flouting all democratic norms and principles. The central control, the crux of the colonial system, prevailed but efficiency was given the go-by. With increasing funds for elementary education by way of foreign aid and loans, corruption crept in at an alarming proportion at different levels of the system. Funding without adequate plan, and no accountable infrastructure for

absorbing it meaningfully, ultimately, ruins the system. It is high time to take note of this. It is no wonder that court cases take away much of the time of different levels of educational administration. Court cases increase as bona fides of the administration and authority decrease, or appear to have decreased.

It is surprising that neither in the West Bengal Primary Education Act of 1973, amending in 1993, nor in the West Bengal

Panchayat Act 1973, amended up to 1993, there is any clause clearly stating the relation between the different levels of panchayat bodies and different level of bodies of primary education such as DPSC or Board. It is all the more surprising because, there are provisions in the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973, for constituting 'shiksha', 'sanskriti' and 'kirta sthaye samiti', at the panchayat samiti and zilla parishad levels, for taking care and look-

Table 6: If Panchayats were Entrusted with Overall Responsibility of School Education, Would the System Improve?

Respondents 1	Improve 2	Deteriorate 3	Remain Same 4	D K 5	Total 6
Guardians	120 (12.7)	725 (76.8)	99 (10.5)	—	944 (100.0)
Teachers	50 (16.6)	196 (64.9)	56 (18.5)	—	302 (100.0)
AC members	12 (13.3)	65 (72.2)	3 (3.3)	—	90 (100.0)
Panchayat members	25 (41.7)	27 (45.0)	8 (13.3)	—	60 (100.0)
School inspectors	5 (16.7)	20 (66.7)	3 (10.0)	2 (6.7)	30 (100.0)

Table 7: Impact of TLC on Enrolment and Retention

Respondents 1	Yes 2	Very Little 3	None 4	D K 5	Total 6
Guardians	67 (7.1)	393 (41.6)	415 (44.0)	69 (7.3)	944 (100.0)
Teachers	54 (17.9)	152 (50.3)	86 (28.5)	10 (3.3)	302 (100.0)
AC members	11 (12.2)	46 (51.1)	32 (35.6)	1 (1.1)	90 (100.0)
Panchayat members	9 (15.0)	26 (43.3)	23 (38.3)	2 (3.3)	60 (100.0)

Table 8: Whether Present Selection and Appointment Procedures of Teachers Is Just?

Respondents 1	Yes 2	No 3	D K 4	Total 5
Teachers	69 (22.8)	212 (70.2)	21 (7.0)	302 (100.0)
AC members	13 (14.4)	74 (82.2)	3 (3.3)	90 (100.0)
Panchayat members	8 (13.3)	46 (76.7)	6 (10.0)	60 (100.0)

Table 9: What Should Be the Basis for Teachers Selection?

Respondents 1	From the Local Area 2	From Within Subdivision 3	From Within District 4	From Outside the District 5	From Anywhere According to Merit 6	D K 7	Total 8
Guardians	243 (25.9)	5 (0.5)	71 (7.6)	6 (0.6)	612 (65.3)	7 (0.7)	944 (100.0)
Teachers	78 (25.8)	6 (2.0)	43 (14.2)	2 (0.7)	173 (57.3)	—	302 (100.0)
AC members	28 (31.1)	3 (3.3)	10 (11.1)	—	49 (54.4)	—	90 (100.0)
Panchayat members	19 (31.7)	2 (3.3)	6 (10.0)	—	33 (55.0)	—	60 (100.0)
School inspectors	1 (3.3)	1 (3.3)	—	—	28 (93.3)	—	30 (100.0)

Table 10: Who Should Select and Appoint Teachers for Primary Schools?

Respondents	Managing Committee	Gram Panchayat	Panchayat Samiti	Zilla Parishad	District Inspector School	District Primary School Council	State Board of Primary Education	District School Service Commission	DK	Total
Guardians	63 (7.0)	36 (4.0)	10 (1.1)	8 (0.9)	31 (3.5)	29 (3.2)	13 (1.5)	706 (78.5)	48 (5.1)	944 (100.0)
Teachers	8 (2.6)	1 (0.6)	1 (0.6)	—	8 (2.6)	8 (2.6)	7 (2.3)	214 (70.9)	—	302 (100.0)
AC members	11 (12.2)	3 (3.3)	3 (3.3)	2 (2.2)	1 (1.1)	1 (1.1)	—	71 (78.9)	—	90 (100.0)
Panchayat members	7 (11.7)	1 (1.7)	1 (1.7)	1 (1.7)	1 (1.7)	1 (1.7)	1 (1.7)	43 (71.7)	—	60 (100.0)
School inspectors	—	—	—	—	2 (6.7)	—	—	28 (93.3)	—	30 (100.0)

ing after the development of primary education in the respective areas. There is provision also for granting funds for the maintenance of primary schools. But there is no statutory provision for the inclusion of any representative of the DPSC in the said 'sthayee samities'. In fact, there is no statutory definition of the relations between panchayat and DPSC or the state board (Acharya 1996, op cit, see also Figure).

Primary Education: Decadal Growth

It may be necessary for a proper understanding to note that the decadal growth of primary education in terms of child population, scholars, schools, teachers, student-teacher and student-school ratios, shows that the progress in these regards, in last two decades of the last century, when panchayat system was in full operation, was not at all encouraging. In fact, growth rates were rather comparatively better during the first two decades after independence. It appears that since independence, child population in the age group 6-11, has grown quite substantially at a rapid pace. The growth rates of number of schools, scholars, and teachers more or less could keep pace with the growth of child population during the first three decades, i.e., 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, after independence. But during the last two decades, i.e., 1980s and 1990s, a declining trend can be observed, in these regards. And these are the decades when it is claimed, panchayat system has taken root in West Bengal. It is all the more surprising that even in the third decade during 1971-81, despite political turmoil in the state, the growth rate was better.

It may be noted that during the decade 1951-61, the child population in the age group 6-11, grew only by about 11 per cent, while the number of schools, scholars and teachers doubled, i.e., there was 100 per cent growth. In the next decade, i.e., 1961-71, child population grew by about 2 per cent, while the growth rate of schools was 16.2 per cent, scholars grew by about 52 per cent, and the number of teachers grew by 37.2 per cent. In the decade 1971-81, child population grew by about 23 per cent and scholars grew by 54 per cent, while the number of schools and teachers grew by about 35 per cent and 39 per cent, respectively (Table 1).

By comparison during 1981-91, child population of the age group 6-11, grew by about 14 per cent, while the number of schools, scholars, and teachers showed a

growth rate of only about 6, 15 and 8 per cent, respectively. In the next nine years from 1991 to 2000, child population grew by about 29 per cent, while the number of schools grew by 3 per cent only. But the number of scholars and teachers, in fact, declined drastically. Number of students declined by -0.04 per cent and the number of teachers declined by -18.5 per cent, i.e., a reduction of 34,000 teachers. As a result, teacher-student ratio which was 1:34 in 1951-52, 1:32 in 1961-62 and 1:35 in 1971-72, stood at 1:40 in 1981-82, 1:41 in 1991-92 and 1:51 in 1999-2000. Similarly, the number of students per school also rose sharply from 98 students per school in 1951-52 to 146 in 1999-2000 (Table 1). It is no wonder if the standard of teaching-learning also declined in accordance with the worsening of teacher-student ratio and classroom facilities as a result of more students per school. It appears that dropout rate has declined from 63 per cent to 51 per cent in the last decade. However, it may be for the no-detention policy adopted by the government as names of students are not generally removed from the register.

Standard of Teaching-Learning

A number of studies for examining the standard of primary schools, conducted recently in West Bengal, in fact, confirm that the standard of teaching-learning has really declined. A study conducted in 1991, in 879 primary schools covering 11,410 students found that "If the state is taken as a whole only 20.3 per cent, students have reached the 'minimum expected score', if Bengali and Mathematics results are combined. In this it is paradoxical that most schools claimed that they follow the system of 'continuous evaluation' [Roy, Mitra and S Roy 1995:32]. Another study was conducted in 1995, covering all the 74 schools from six gram panchayats of three different districts. Of the 73 schools studied, 63 were primary schools. About 34 per cent of students enrolled in class IV, had been examined, selecting randomly. It has been found that only 9.8 per cent of students examined could score the minimum 50 per cent and above marks in both Bengali and Mathematics. The entire process of preparation and moderation of questions, conducting the examination and scrutiny of answer scripts were done by a batch of primary teachers and school sub-inspectors as they were the persons responsible for looking after the teaching-learning in primary schools [Acharya 1996].

Interestingly, only five out of 64 primary schools studied, were considered to be well performing schools as 40 per cent of all students examined from class IV, scored 50 per cent and above marks both in Bengali and Mathematics. It may be worth noting that even 60 years ago, the proportion of well performed primary schools was similar as out of 64,000 primary schools in undivided Bengal in late 1930s, only 5,000 schools were considered by an important educational officer of the time, to be "effectively contributing towards the removal of illiteracy...at a generous estimate" [Sen 1941:236, 237]. In fact, long ago doubts were raised by the C.A.B.E report of 1944, regarding the effectiveness of five years of primary schooling. It strongly opined that "basic education from 6-14, is an organic whole and will lose much of its value, if not so treated; in any case education which lasts only five years and ends about the age of 11, cannot be regarded as an adequate preparation either for life or livelihood. If, as would appear to be the case, a universal compulsory system of basic education can only be introduced by stages and the progression should clearly be from area to area, not from age to age" [Sargent 1944:3]. However, no one paid any heed to the advice and our leaders and planners moved in the

Table 11: Whether there is Adequate Educational Facilities in the Village

Respondents	Yes	No	DK	Total
1	2	3	4	5
Guardians	655 (67.3)	289 (30.6)	20 (2.1)	944 (100.0)
AC members	57 (63.3)	33 (36.7)	-	90 (100.0)
Panchayat members	27 (45.0)	32 (53.3)	1 (1.7)	60 (100.0)

Table 12: Whether other Books Are Necessary in Addition to Free Textbooks Supplied

Respondents	Yes	No	DK	Total
1	2	3	4	5
Guardians	634 (67.2)	138 (14.6)	172 (18.2)	944 (100.0)
Teachers	233 (77.2)	67 (22.2)	2 (0.6)	302 (100.0)

Table 13: Whether Village Schools have Adequate Space for Holding All the Classes

Respondents	Yes	No	DK	Total
1	2	3	4	5
Teachers	96 (31.8)	206 (68.2)	-	302 (100.0)
Teachers	31 (34.4)	59 (65.6)	-	90 (100.0)

opposite direction. And now we are heading to a blind alley with fictitious enrolment figures, high dropouts and under-achievements.

There maybe no doubt that primary education in West Bengal languished both in quantitative and qualitative terms during the last two decades of the previous century. According to the findings of the study conducted in six gram panchayats, successful students generally belonged to the upper castes and upper income groups of rural hierarchy. On the other hand, the dropouts and underachievers were ordinarily from the lower castes and lower income groups of rural society. There maybe no doubt, "educational backwardness is largely a symptom of economic backwardness" [Eswaraprasad and Sharma 1987; Acharya 1994; Kaul 2001]. It is no wonder that all the schools identified as effective are from economically advanced villages [Acharya 1996:41-44]. The study also found a very high dropout rate of 58 per cent, apart from underachievements by the majority of the schools. And this is despite a well-entrenched panchayat system, and decentralisation of primary education administration. A comparative study of pre-panchayat and post-panchayat period as has been done above, confirms the fears expressed by many scholars and administrators like Hartog, Sargent and B G Kher (1954) long ago, regarding the wisdom of a policy of so-called decentralisation.

Findings of an Opinion Study

Findings of an opinion study conducted in six gram panchayats, among guardians, teachers, school-inspectors, members of school committees and panchayats, only confirms the above contentions. The main thrust of the study was, how according to respondents of different categories, the primary school system worked under the panchayati raj. There were among others four cardinal questions namely, whether the village schools were holding regular classes during the last five years, if the academic standard of teaching-learning improved, deteriorated or remained the same during the last five years, if panchayats took adequate interest in the management of the village schools and if panchayats were entrusted with the responsibility of school education would it improve, deteriorate or remain the same. Two other important questions were, were primary teachers attending to their duties regularly during the last five years, and whether the

present selection and appointment procedure of teachers was just? Another important question was, what was the impact of Total Literacy Campaign (TLC) on enrolment and retention of children in the school.

It has been found that an overwhelming majority of the respondents opined that the standard of teaching-learning had deteriorated during the last five years. Almost 85 per cent of guardians and 83 per cent of school inspectors, 65 per cent of teachers and 63 per cent of attendance committee (CAC) members opined that the standard had really fallen. But 73 per cent of panchayat members held a different view, as according to them, the standard remained the same. Very few among all the respondents, in fact, claimed that it had improved (Table 2). Interestingly, a vast majority of guardians, attendance committee and panchayat members held the opinion that schools were not held regularly and teachers were irregular in attending to their duty (Tables 3, 4). One may find an inconsistency in the response of the panchayat members in this regard. How could the standard remained the same if schools were not holding classes regularly and the teachers were irregular in their attendance? It appears that they could not admit to the deterioration of standards as that might put them also in the dock. They in fact, tried to shirk their responsibility by putting the blame on others shoulder. However, unwittingly they got trapped in the process. It appears from the experiences of field investigators that panchayat members are more interested in power politics than educational development in the rural society.

It is interesting to note that 62 per cent of guardians, 69 per cent of teachers, and 62 per cent of school committee members thought that the panchayats were not taking adequate interests in proper management of village schools, in their areas. It is all the more interesting that 76 per cent of guardians, 64 per cent of teachers, 72 per cent of attendance committee members and about 67 per cent of school inspectors considered that quality of education would rather go down if the panchayats were

entrusted with the overall responsibility of looking after primary school system in rural areas. As expected, panchayat members responded differently, only 45 per cent of them viewed that the quality of education would go down, while about 42 per cent opined that the quality would improve if panchayats were entrusted with the responsibility of primary education (Tables 5, 6).

Surprisingly, only a few of all respondents viewed that the TLC had any strong and positive impact on overall enrolment and retention. Only 7 per cent guardians, about 18 per cent teachers, 12 per cent attendance committee members and 15 per cent of panchayat members said an emphatic 'yes', while 44 per cent guardians, 28 per cent teachers, 36 per cent attendance committee members and 38 per cent panchayat members thought that TLC had no impact at all on enrolment and retention. A considerable proportion however, opined that TLC had some impact though very little, on enrolment and retention. From personal experiences of field investigators it appears that the respondents were rather reluctant to answer which might be unpleasant for the government.¹ Anyway, about 42 per cent of guardians, 50 per cent teachers, 51 per cent committee members and 43 per cent panchayat members opined thus (Table 7).

It is interesting however, that an overwhelming majority of teachers, attendance committee members, and panchayat members considered that the present procedures of selection and appointment of teachers were not just, and need to be changed. In fact, 70 per cent teachers, 82 per cent attendance committee members and about 77 per cent panchayat members

Table 15: Best Way of Assessing Students' Achievement

Respondents	Old Examination System	Present Continuous Evaluation	Total
1	2	3	4
Guardians	765 (81.0)	179 (19.0)	944 (100.)
Teachers	249 (82.5)	53 (17.5)	302 (100.0)
AC members	65 (72.2)	25 (27.8)	90 (100.0)

Table 14: Impact of No Detention Policy

Respondents	Help Retention of Students in School	Decreases Interest of Students in Studies	Increases the Interest in Studies	None	DK	Total
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Guardians	61 (6.5)	751 (80.6)	106 (11.4)	14 (1.5)	12 (1.3)	944 (100.)
Teachers	28 (9.2)	221 (72.2)	38 (12.4)	15 (4.9)	-	302 (100.0)
AC members	14 (15.6)	60 (66.7)	12 (13.3)	4 (4.4)	-	90 (100.0)
Panchayat members	7 (11.7)	46 (76.7)	5 (8.3)	2 (3.3)	-	60 (100.0)

thought that the procedures were unjust (Table 8). An overwhelming majority also opined that teachers should be selected strictly according to merit and from anywhere without any preference for local candidates (Table 9). It is all the more interesting to note that most of the guardians (78.5 per cent), teachers (70.9 per cent), AC members (78.9 per cent), panchayat members (71.7 per cent) and school inspectors (93 per cent) opined that teachers should be selected by a separate school service commission, instead of by the DPSC, which is the practice now (Table 10).

In fact, most of the respondents from all the categories, were of the view that neither panchayat nor the state board of primary education and government departments of education should be entrusted with the responsibility of selecting primary teachers. Findings show that bona fides of DPSC, panchayat bodies and educational administrators were very much in question. It appears that panchayat members were also not happy with the DPSC with regard to teachers' selection and appointment. This is of course an unhealthy development. The reasons for increasing court cases against teachers' appointments are implicit in the above findings. The relations between the DPSC and local panchayat bodies also appeared ambiguous to the field investigators. The 'sabhahipati' of zilla parishad and the chairman of DPSC may have good understanding between them at informal plane as both are ordinarily members or fellow travellers of the ruling party, but at the level below there is lack of coordination between the two bodies, in absence of any formal definition of relations.

This lack of coordination had also its reflection on the extension and development of educational facilities in the villages. It is no wonder that a sizeable proportion of guardians, members of attendance committee and majority members of local panchayats felt that there was not adequate educational facilities in the village (Table 11). Interestingly, a majority of guardians and teachers considered that the prescribed textbooks as supplied by the education department free of cost, was not adequate, and some other books were necessary in addition to that (Table 12). Teachers and attendance committee members generally were of the view that village schools did not have adequate space for holding all the classes separately (Table 13). Similarly, majority of teachers, guardians, members of attendance committees

and panchayat members thought that the 'no detention policy' as was in vogue then, in fact, made students less fearful of the system but at the same time non-serious about studying. They were generally against the policy of 'no detention' and 'continuous evaluation' instead of old examination system. (Tables 14, 15).²

A great majority of guardians, attendance committee members, and panchayat members had complaints against teachers as well. According to the majority of them the practice of private tuition by teachers should be completely stopped. According to many of them school buildings, furniture and teaching aids were not adequate for proper teaching-learning (Tables 16, 17). All these only indicate that the government has failed to boost up the primary education system in the state.

Conclusion

No doubt, quite a dismal picture of primary education in West Bengal, emerges from the findings of the field study and other documentary evidences as discussed above. It is beyond imagination how in the near future universal elementary education would become feasible when even the primary system is in such a shambles. It appears that two decades of left rule in West Bengal was not all that bliss, particularly, for primary education, despite the entrenched panchayat system and a decentralised structure of primary education administration. In fact, both political and administrative bureaucracy were in full command despite the so-called administrative decentralisation. Panchayats and district level educational agencies like

DPSC, and inspectorate were really meant for implementing the command from above. The command is not always explicit, often it is implicit. It reminds one of Kafka's *The Castle*. It should be noted that a political party based on the principle of so-called democratic centralism cannot allow a truly decentralised administration, in any area of social activity. And it has not happened in West Bengal either. Panchayats in West Bengal in reality, are not autonomous bodies, nor are they guided by the collective will of the people. The party represents the people and hence the diktat of the party is the 'true expression' of people's will. Rather it is the 'authenticated expression' of people's will. One should remember that panchayats in West Bengal are not village panchayats or people's panchayats but party panchayats, though formally elected by the people. How far the elections were fair is another story beyond our discussion.

Two decades of panchayati raj in West Bengal, it appears, had done more harms to the village society than good, by destroying the 'village solidarity' the very basis of its existence. In fact, village solidarity has been replaced by party solidarity, and in the process, people's initiatives have been throttled. The spirit of spontaneity which is the crux of people's initiative and decentralised functioning, has withered. The recent violence in different parts of West Bengal is only an outcome of this political panchayat system. Through this system of party panchayat a class of new mandarins have emerged in the village society, who are unscrupulous to the extreme and heinously power

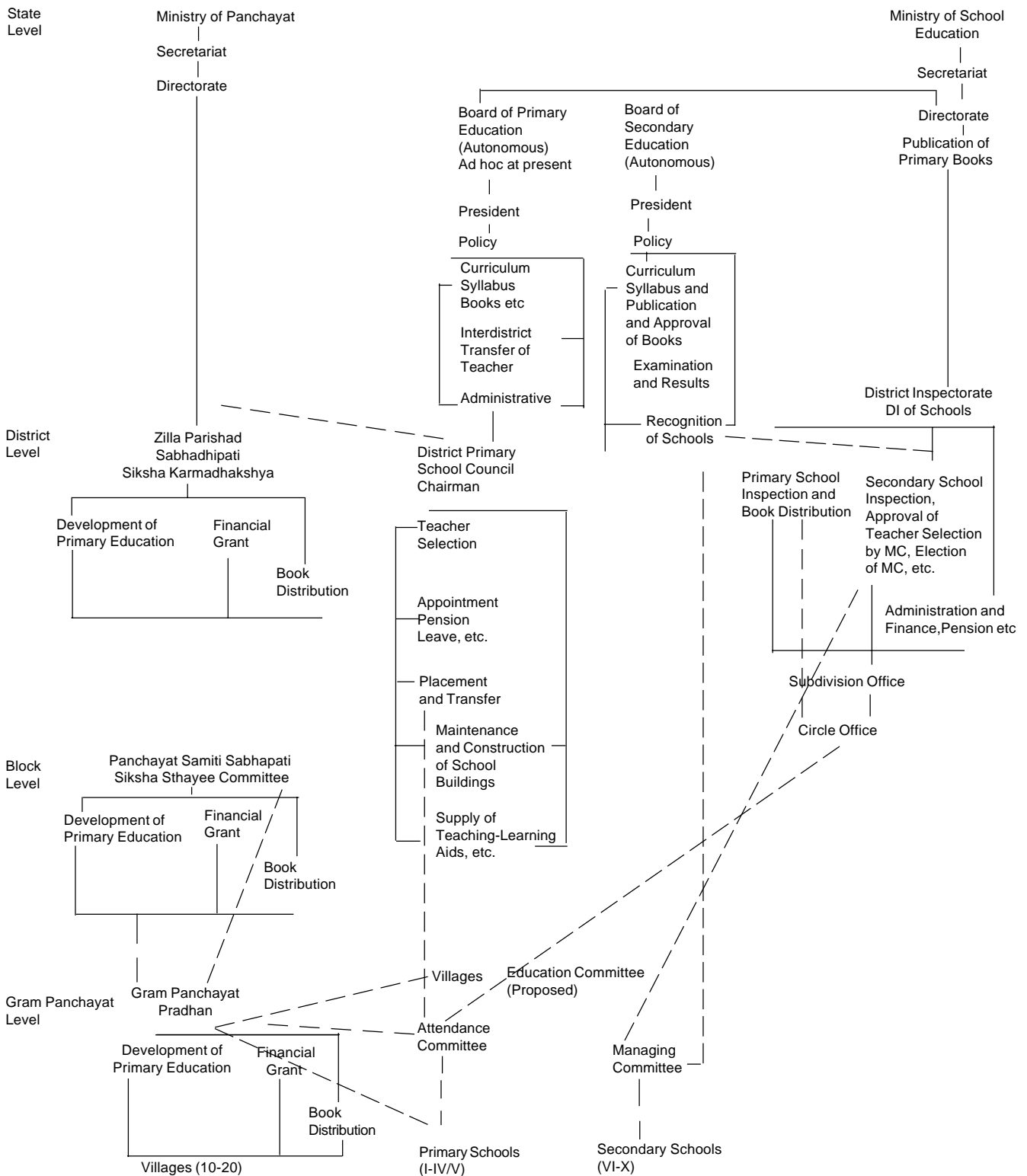
Table 16: Response to Private Tuition by Teacher-in-Service

Respondents 1	Completely Stopped 2	Encouraged 3	Restricted 4	D K 5	Total 6
Guardians	640 (68.0)	131 (13.9)	170 (18.1)	3 (0.3)	944 (100.0)
AC members	65 (72.2)	5 (5.6)	20 (22.2)	—	90 (100.0)
Panchayat members	36 (60.0)	4 (6.7)	20 (33.3)	—	60 (100.0)

Table 17: Opinion Regarding the Status of Village Schools

Respondents 1	Satisfactory 2	Somewhat Satisfactory 3	Not Satisfactory 4	Total 5
<i>(a) School buildings</i>				
AC members	15 (16.7)	36 (40.0)	39 (43.3)	90 (100.0)
Panchayat members	1 (1.7)	29 (48.3)	30 (50.0)	60 (100.0)
<i>(b) School furniture</i>				
AC members	7 (7.8)	22 (24.4)	61 (67.8)	90 (100.0)
Panchayat members	1 (1.7)	15 (25.0)	44 (73.3)	60 (100.0)
<i>(c) Teachers aids</i>				
AC members	7 (7.8)	28 (31.1)	38 (42.2)	90 (100.0)
Panchayat members	4 (6.7)	20 (33.3)	20 (33.3)	60 (100.0)
<i>(d) Distribution of prescribed textbooks</i>				
AC members	22 (24.4)	30 (33.3)	38 (42.2)	90 (100.0)
Panchayat members	13 (21.7)	27 (45.0)	20 (33.3)	60 (100.0)

Figure: Structure and Function of School Education: West Bengal



Source: Educating West Bengal: Problems of Participatory Management, First Report, 1996 (Monograph), Shiksha Bhavna, Kolkata.

hungry. Unfortunately, primary teachers being a major group of panchayat members, are also involved in this unholy power game. This has also vitiated the primary system. It is futile to expect, they will really try to induce a need for education among people and transform the 'induced need' to 'felt need'. At best they may try to carry a programme of education which will help keep the people docile and loyal to the new masters. There is no doubt, success or failure of an education programme depends primarily on teachers. Whatever might be the aim or intent of planners of an education programme, teachers can mould it according to their convenience and bias. In fact, teachers can make or unmake a programme of education. It is very difficult for the teachers to overcome their own class or caste biases, particularly, when students' class or caste interests conflict with that of their own.

It should be borne in mind that primary and elementary education should aim at not only 'functional literacy' which means mainly the acquirements of literal and numeral skills but also 'cultural and critical literacy'. Cultural literacy acquaints one to his own cultural heritage and the history of his own people. An archaeological approach is required for fruition of such a programme. Critical literacy makes one aware of his authentic position in the prevailing social dynamics, particularly, the position of his own people in the agrarian relations of the rural society. A participatory approach is necessary for this. Participation in solidarity actions aiming at changing the exploitative and unjust structure of the society, is a necessary condition for the success of such a programme.

This is a tremendous task requiring much dedication, imagination, creativity and above all a feeling of solidarity with the people irrespective of party politics. And the initiative should come from below. A truly people's panchayat may contribute a lot in initiating such a process. Teachers and organisers of education may play a vital role in the process if only they could overcome their own class and caste bias and orient themselves towards a non-violent solidarity action programme. A massive orientation programme of teachers shall have to be undertaken. For a universal elementary education programme West Bengal shall have to upgrade a minimum of 40,000 existing primary schools to eight class Junior high or upper primary schools and appoint a little more than two lakhs

of new teachers for imparting education at the elementary level. By a rough estimate it can be reasonably said that 1,60,000 new classrooms have to be constructed. An orientation programme covering about four lakhs of elementary teachers have to be undertaken. In the present political situation meaningful initiation of such a programme is unthinkable. Alas! a communist-led left government ruling in West Bengal continuously for 24 years missed the train miserably. [E]

Notes

[In this paper findings of a research study on 'Problems of Management and Administration of School Education' conducted in three districts of West Bengal in 1994-95, have been used. The study was undertaken by Siksha Bhavna, Kolkata, and was funded by UNDP through the national project on Research Project on Strategies and Financing for Human Development, Thiruvananthapuram. I am thankful to all these organisations and my associates who assisted me in conducting the study. This is a revised and enlarged version of a talk given at the seminar on Community Participation and Empowerment in Primary Education, held in Delhi on December 8-10, 1999, organised by NIEPA and European Commission.]

1 It is generally claimed that in West Bengal literacy rate increased sharply in 1991, because of the Total Literacy Campaign which commenced at least in three districts, Medinipur, Burdwan and Hooghly by November-December 1990. However, it is difficult to substantiate this claim by hard facts. In fact, no district in West Bengal could make substantial progress in TLC before 1991 Census, except perhaps Burdwan, which claimed to have achieved total literacy by May 1991. Even in Burdwan actual teaching-learning did not commence before December 1990. Till February 1991, the progress in this regard was quite slow and tardy, and in no way it was possible to make the 12 lakhs target illiterates literates by the end of February 1991, the target date. The target date in fact was extended because of that by another two months. But by that time Census 1991 was complete. The first external interim evaluation of TLC in West Bengal was held in Burdwan in February 1991. The report of interim evaluation was placed before the EC, National Literacy Mission Authority in Delhi in 1991. The report recorded the progress [Acharya 1991]. Medinipur though undertook the campaign programme even before Burdwan, hardly could make any progress initially. They in fact, re-arranged the whole process again in January 1991. Till 1991 census, the campaign was yet to pick up momentum. It is no wonder that Medinipur announced the completion of TLC by claiming total literacy in the district long after 1991 census. Hooghly also suffered at the beginning and announced the district literate months after Burdwan. It may be noted that Jalpaiguri district, which took up TLC long after census 1991, achieved a 9.99 per cent increase in literacy while Hooghly shows a 9.68 per cent increase in 1991 census. It is now almost universally recognised that the claims of achieving total literacy by different districts in West Bengal should be taken with a grain of salt.

2 'No-detention' and 'Continuous evaluation', these two policy decisions became issues of strong agitation along with the abolition of English at primary level in West Bengal. This is an example how pedagogically correct policies instead of yielding good result, may cause much of disorientation in the educational progress when handled inaptly. The inefficiency and incompetence of educational administration in West Bengal have become apparent through these bunglings. How far the political interference is responsible for these bunglings may be a subject of another paper.

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