

Questionable Priorities

The tabling of the Ranju Gopal Mukherjee committee report in the West Bengal state assembly recently raised a lot of hackles. The 13-member committee had been set up in October 2001 to consider a revamp of the school education system and put forward proposals in certain critical areas such as a change in academic session, reduction in holidays, sharing of infrastructure and vocational training. After nearly two years and two extension terms, however, the 116-page document the committee has presented merely endorses and upholds shibboleths the Left Front government itself has long discarded. While it claimed to have been presented only after detailed discussions with all teachers' bodies, teachers' unions across the political spectrum have opposed almost all of its recommendations.

On the question of English education, the committee's initial response in December 2002 was to submit a 'personal opinion' that English should be taught at the 'primary level'. The ambiguity of this response had prompted a term extension but the committee in its final report has recommended instead "preparations should be made for result-oriented teaching of English as compulsory second language from class V". Since 1998, as per the Pabitra Sarkar committee guidelines, English is already being taught from class III onwards. The Mukherjee committee opposed the early teaching of English on the ground that nowhere in the world is a second language taught below class IV. There is near unanimity among teachers in their opposition to the panel's views on the early teaching of English. Teachers' unions have been pressurising the government to introduce English at still lower levels – class I as was done till 1980. The Bengal Primary Teachers' Association of the SUCI, which had sponsored an earlier bandh in 1998 demanding reintroduction of English from class I has threatened to renew protests if the government accepted the Mukherjee committee opinion.

A key motive, however, behind the Left Front government's desire to revamp school education was its desire to establish parity in curricula followed by the state primary, secondary and higher secondary boards and other examination systems – the ICSE, ISC and CBSE. This would facilitate admission processes to colleges under Kolkata and other state universities. While the committee does accept a difference in the various examination systems, it rejects the need to reduce the student workload, which under the state board for the higher secondary and madhyamik exams is based on syllabi taught over two classes instead of one as followed by other exam systems. The report refuses to compare curricula followed by the other boards 'since they have no commitment to mass education'. Prompted by the increasing complaints of mistakes in madhyamik and higher secondary examination results, the committee was also asked to work out a 'flawless' evaluation scheme by the respective boards. The committee's solution

is to do away with the review system altogether; instead it suggests that photocopies of answer scripts should be provided – another suggestion that has displeased teachers' unions.

On vocational education the committee has only recommended the withdrawal of computer literacy programmes from classes VII to XII and has suggested offering computer application as an optional subject in classes IX and X. It has also suggested that no private company be involved in computer teaching. These vague proposals are a reflection of a general lack of interest at all levels in developing vocational education. Other previous reports – the Sparshamani Chatterjee report submitted in the late 1990s – that looked at ways to popularise vocational education at the secondary level have all been consigned to the shelves.

While the state government has been quick to allay teachers' fears saying that the report's recommendations would need a full discussion, the real ills that plague the education in the state remain unaddressed. There has been a steady decline in enrolment to Bengali-medium schools even in rural areas and the government strangely attributes this to a decline in the Bengali-speaking population in certain districts. The shoddy state of primary education in the state is a well-documented fact. The Pratichi Trust's report found the state's primary education system plagued by a deep class chasm amongst students and a high rate of teacher and student absenteeism. More recently, a 3.5 per cent decline in literacy rate had been recorded between the fourth round of the NSSO (1999-2000) and the subsequent census report. Poor infrastructure and lack of teachers are common issues across all education levels. Around 15,000 posts of headmaster in primary schools and 1,257 in government-aided senior secondary schools have been lying vacant for years together; the state has around 4,000 single-teacher primary schools. Recruitments have more or less been frozen, with vacancies created through retirements remaining unfilled. Given this situation, the issue of introduction of English at the primary level appears somewhat trivial. **EPW**