

## Panchayats and Elementary Education

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Poromesh Acharya's article 'Education: Panchayats and Decentralisation, Myths and Realities' (*EPW*, February 23, 2002) is flawed in many respects. It contains inaccurate observations, uses dated information, lacks analytical rigour and makes unnecessary digressions. A few examples will suffice.

According to Acharya, the Indian Constitution was amended to facilitate the "strategy of so-called decentralisation of educational management through the panchayati raj" (p 788). It is a common knowledge that the objectives of the 73rd and 74th Constitution amendments were much larger in scope. Besides, amendment of the Constitution was not necessary to decentralise the management of elementary education. The author gives an account of the institutional arrangements for managing the school level educational system in West Bengal on the basis of a report prepared in 1996 (see figure at p 795). He does not feel it necessary to incorporate the institutional and programmatic changes brought about since 1996, especially in the field of primary education, through such projects as DPEP, Sarba Siksha Abhijan, Sishu Siksha Karmasuchi, etc.<sup>1</sup> In the concluding part, he suddenly embarks upon a rather clumsy discussion on the concepts of 'cultural and critical literacy' and ends up with the pompous suggestion of linking primary or elementary education with the need for participation (of children) "in solidarity actions aiming at changing the exploitative and unjust structure of the society" (p 796).

Examples like those mentioned above can be multiplied. But, this is not our intention. The purpose of this rejoinder is to challenge the central point of Acharya's paper that the panchayati raj institutions should take the blame for the deficiencies of the elementary education of the state of West Bengal.

That West Bengal's record in universalising primary education is poor

is now a settled fact. A World Bank report placed West Bengal as one of the problem states along with Andhra Pradesh and the four BIMARU states. The report expressed concern over the fact that the number of children not attending school (either due to non-enrolment or by reason of dropout) is alarmingly high in West Bengal.<sup>2</sup> A study done by the Indian Institute of Management, Kolkata in 1995-98, brought out many deficiencies in the management of primary education in West Bengal in terms of non-enrolment of children, poor infrastructure, low teacher/school ratio, absence of monitoring, etc.<sup>3</sup> A recent study of Pratichi Trust<sup>4</sup> on the 'delivery of primary education' also highlighted various disquieting features of the state's primary schools. The report particularly drew attention on the need for paying attention to such aspects as the accountability, motivation and orientation of teachers, so that a congenial learning situation can be created in the schools, particularly for those children who come from the neglected sections of the society.

We have, therefore, no dispute with the author when he concludes that "two decades of left rule in West Bengal was not all that bliss, particularly, for primary education..." (p 794) But, when he puts the panchayati raj institutions on the dock for the rather unenviable educational situation of the state, it prompts a feeling of annoyance. For, the facts, even such facts as are highlighted by the author himself, do not substantiate the conclusion, and, secondly, it tends to lead to the erroneous impression that the local self-government bodies of the state are not reliable institutions to be involved in programmes for achieving the national goal of 'education for all'.

To put the record straight, it is necessary to point out that the panchayats of West Bengal have never been given the responsibility to manage school education, either primary or secondary. Even after the 73rd Constitution amendment, the subject of primary education was not devolved to the

PRIs, as has been done in many other states. It is only recently that they have been involved in certain new schemes of primary education, about which we shall discuss later.

The present institutional arrangements for managing primary education in West Bengal is guided by the Primary Education Act of 1973. Under this act, there is an autonomous body called West Bengal Board of Primary Education at the state level. This body is in overall charge of primary education in the state and has wide ranging power in academic, administrative, financial and developmental matters. At each district, there is another autonomous body called District Primary School Council (DPSC). DPSCs look after the day-to-day management of schools, such as, selection and appointment of teachers, their transfers, posting and disciplinary matters, inspection of schools, development of schools, etc. Teachers and other staff connected with primary education are under the administrative control of the DPSC. The district inspector of schools and other inspecting officers (sub inspector or assistant inspector of primary schools) who are government employees work under the guidance and supervision of the Council. The Council consists of elected and ex-officio members. The elected members come from among the primary teachers, 'persons interested in education', and representatives of panchayat samitis and the zilla parishad of the district. The chairperson of the Council is nominated by the state government. Thus, the Council can be called a representative institution only in a very restricted sense, loaded as it is with the ex-officio members and teachers' representatives in a rather disproportionate manner. Even the provisions for restricted representation were not adhered to for over two decades when the Councils remained fully nominated bodies.

Many of these facts have been given by Acharya in his paper under discussion. But, he has failed to notice the inherent contradiction in the scheme of creating an alternative institution in the form of DPSC, precisely at a time (early 1980s) when the panchayati raj institutions of the state were on the path of ascendancy. The relationship between the DPSC and the standing committees on education of zilla

parishad/panchayat samiti had not been defined. The position persists even today. Here was a case of decentralising the management of primary education and freeing it from centralised bureaucratic control. But, the institutional format that was chosen was strange and negates the universal principle that elementary education is typically a local government function. The sources of many of the ills that the elementary education of the state suffers from can be located in the setting up of parallel institutions bypassing the firmly rooted panchayati raj institutions of the state. In other words, it is not the 'sorry state of affairs that prevail in the panchayat system' which is 'largely to blame for the debacle', as the editorial intro of the article affirm. It is the dissociation of PRIs and the local communities from educational management, which remains one of the major causes for the unhappy state of affairs in the field. Anybody familiar with West Bengal's educational system would agree that DPSCs have so far done little to discharge its statutory responsibilities, other than routine administration, and that too without enhancing the level of efficiency. On the other hand, quite encouraging results have emerged, wherever gram panchayats and the local communities have been involved in spreading elementary education. To this, we may now turn our attention.

In 1997, the state government introduced a scheme of alternative education. Termed as Sishu Siksha Kendras (SSK) or Child Education Centres, schools outside the mainstream primary schools began to be opened on the basis of the demands raised by the local communities justifying the need of such centres as per norms given by the state government. Each such centre is run by a managing committee of nine members, seven of whom are parents/guardians of the school going children and one is the local member of gram panchayat. At least, three members of the committee are women. The committee is composed every year in the meeting of the 'gram sansad' (ward level gram sabha of West Bengal's panchayat system). This committee selects the teachers who are local women and have the prescribed educational qualification. They are appointed on contractual basis and are supervised by the managing committee. The infrastructure of the school is arranged by the local community. The gram panchayat facilitates the whole process and assists the managing committee in solving the local problems. The state government in the panchayats and rural development department oversees the pro-

gramme, provides funds and arranges training of teachers and academic supervision. Today, there are over 11,000 such centres spread over all the districts of the state. Researchers have noted that the SSKs are functioning better than the mainstream schools.<sup>5</sup> This shows the merit in decentralisation of education management through the panchayat system and the local communities.

From 1999, the West Bengal government has been trying to introduce participatory panchayat level planning. A model was developed drawing inspiration from Kerala's people's plan and the state's earlier experience in village level planning. The model was tried in four pilot blocks during 2000-01 and results have been found to be encouraging.<sup>6</sup> From the year 2000-01, the state government started giving untied funds in order to encourage panchayat level planning. According to the model developed for such planning, plans are to be prepared for seven sectors, four of which belonged to the social sector, namely, education, primary health care, women's development and social security. According to the information received so far, many gram panchayats have changed their old mindset in terms of involving the community in the planning process and giving due attention to the social sector development. In these panchayats, a portion of the untied funds for the development of primary education or health care or for the improvement of 'anganwadi' centres have been utilised. All these is being done even though these subjects have not yet been handed over to the panchayats. This goes to validate our central point that decentralisation of the management of elementary education (along with primary health care, public distribution system, disaster management, etc) through the panchayats and the local communities is a necessary condition for achieving high level of human development.

It is necessary to point out that today there are several departments of the state government working at the grass roots level in the field of elementary education. The women and child development and social welfare department runs anganwadi centres which impart pre-primary education to children. The literacy programmes and library services are looked after by two separate directorates of the mass education extension department. Special schools for child labour are the responsibility of labour department. The panchayat with the rural development department runs SSKs and the backward class welfare department has

a number of incentive schemes for the children belonging to SC/ST communities. Above all, there is the department of school education and state and district primary school councils to look after mainstream primary education. Where is the institution, other than the panchayat, which can bring about horizontal coordination at the village level and, thus, create a synergic effect to fulfil the mission of universalisation of elementary education?<sup>[7]</sup>

[I am grateful to George Mathew, director, Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi for his comments and suggestions on this subject.]

## Notes

- 1 DPEP stands for District Primary Education Programme. Its objective is to strengthen the primary education system by making investment in infrastructure, capacity building of teachers, pedagogical renewal activities, alternative education, etc. Launched in 1997, the programme now covers 10 districts of West Bengal. Sarba Siksha Karmasuchi is a similar programme for the non-DPEP districts. Sishu Siksha Karmasuchi is a novel system of alternative schooling. A short account of this will be found in the present article.
- 2 The report observes: "75 per cent of the children who are out of school (in India) live in six states: Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. ...Almost half of the additional class rooms and teachers required to enrol all children aged 6-10 are needed in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Rajasthan has the lowest female literacy rates...Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal are populous states with below average attendance rates. It is in these six states that the key challenges of educational development lies." See, World Bank (1997), *Primary Education in India*, (Allied Publishers, New Delhi).
- 3 Raghabendra Chattopadhyay, Sudip Chaudhuri, Saila Ghosh, Anup Sen, V N Reddy (1998), *The Status of Primary Education in West Bengal*, (UNICEF-sponsored study prepared for the Government of West Bengal).
- 4 Pratchi (India) and Pratchi (Bangladesh) Trusts were instituted in 1999 by Amartya Sen with contributions from his Nobel Award. Pratchi (India) Trust conducted a survey on the delivery of primary education in West Bengal. Preliminary findings of the research were released to the press in November, 2001.
- 5 Amartya Sen's 'Introduction' to the Pratchi Trust report referred to above. A study conducted by the Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta also came to the same conclusion.
- 6 George Mathew, Buddhadeb Ghosh and Rajan Soni, (2001), *The Scoping Study on Decentralisation and Convergence Issues in West Bengal*, (Report prepared at the Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi, for DFID, UK). Also see, Maitreesh Ghatak and Maitreya Ghatak, (2002), 'Recent Reforms in the Panchayat System in West Bengal: Towards Greater Participatory Governance?' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 5, 2002.