

# State of Primary Education in West Bengal

*Successive efforts initiated by the Left Front government have played a positive role in the expansion of primary education in West Bengal. However, as the findings of this study establish, certain problems still prevail. Poor attendance, perceived class differences, poverty and gender discrimination prevent socially underprivileged groups from accessing education opportunities. On the other hand, the success of the government's experiment in providing cost-effective primary education, particularly to the most underprivileged sections of society must be recognised.*

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This essay briefly reports the main findings of a study on the delivery of primary education in West Bengal conducted by the Pratichi (India) Trust, under the guidance of Amartya Sen.<sup>1</sup> The first phase of the study was conducted in 18 villages in the Birbhum, Medinipur and Puruliya districts of West Bengal and was published by Pratichi under the title *The Pratichi Education Report* [Rana, Rafique, Sengupta 2002].<sup>2</sup> Eighteen primary schools and 17 Sishu Siksha Kendras (SSK) were examined in these three districts. The preliminary findings from a further 20 schools and the same number of SSKs (in 20 villages in the districts of Bardhaman, Murshidabad and Darjeeling) confirm the findings of the first phase of the study. Some of the data from this second phase have been incorporated into this essay.

Although our findings are suggestive rather than definitive, the intensive nature of our investigations, our efforts to relate the delivery of primary education to class, caste, gender and other social factors, and the fair degree of uniformity we found among the six districts provide, perhaps, a basis for some general conclusions that may be applicable to the present state of primary education in the state of West Bengal as a whole.

The Left Front in its election manifesto for the 1977 assembly elections in West Bengal, promised to implement "concrete and effective programmes, including legislative and administrative measures backed by popular efforts, for eradication of illiteracy". While the eradication of illiteracy has not yet been achieved (the literacy rate in West Bengal is 69 per cent according to the 2001 Census), the Left Front government has made significant progress in terms of reducing illiteracy, increasing student enrolment, establishing new primary schools and appointing teachers [GoWB 1992, 2001, 2001-02].<sup>3</sup> The non-plan expenditure on education in the state budget increased from 12.9 per cent in 1976-77 to 21.1 per cent in 1992-93 [GoWB 1992]. The Left Front government, in accordance with its election manifesto, has to a large extent achieved success in giving "security of services to teachers and employees in all educational institutions". This has included substantial increases in teachers' salaries. The Left Front government has also implemented several schemes, making school education free, supplying dry rations of food and free textbooks at the primary level, supplying free uniforms to a substantial number of girl students and so on [GoWB 1992, 2001, 2001-02; Rana, Rafique, Sengupta 2002].

All these efforts have played a positive role in the expansion of primary education in West Bengal. However, our findings point to a number of major problems in assuring the quality of

primary education delivered in the state, as we will discuss in the rest of this essay. It is important to place these discouraging results in a broader perspective, since the poor quality of primary education is a problem for the rest of India as well. Another concern of national importance is the disadvantage faced by the socially deprived sections of society in terms of acquiring primary education.<sup>4</sup>

In West Bengal, like elsewhere in India, there is reason to be worried about the condition of the socially and economically underprivileged communities, particularly the scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and religious minorities. Often, children from underprivileged communities suffer most – both from the lack of accessibility and the poor quality of education.

The government of West Bengal launched a programme called the 'Sishu Siksha Karmasuchi' (SSK) in 1999 to bring the underprivileged into the fold of the primary schooling system.<sup>5</sup> Although the SSK effort at present covers eight per cent of primary school-going children in the state, its relative success and potential for improvement suggest that the performance of SSKs should be taken into account in any study of the state of primary education in West Bengal. This essay aims to examine the quality of primary education, its implications and the prospects for its improvement in West Bengal.

## Quality Concerns

The quality of education in the primary schooling system was one of the major concerns expressed during the fieldwork for the study and in a parent-teacher workshop organised by the Pratichi (India) Trust.<sup>6</sup> Children tend to learn little in primary school and largely depend on private tuition. "Children of classes 3 and 4", as a primary school teacher wrote to the Pratichi research team "cannot write their names properly". The quality of teaching can be judged from the fact that 41 per cent of the children interviewed said that there was no teaching on the day preceding the interview. Complaints about the performance of the teachers are, it seems, unending – "they don't teach", "they don't come to school", "they come late", "they sleep in class", "they make the children pick the grey hair of teachers", and so on. In the newly established Sishu Siksha Kendras (SSKs) the situation is relatively better, but here too there is scope for improvement. *Poor attendance:* The poor quality of teaching (including teacher absenteeism) combined with other socio-economic problems (such as the involvement of children in sibling care, economic activities, and so on) has contributed to a high level of absenteeism

among the children. We found attendance rates of only 54 per cent in the primary schools and 64 per cent in the SSKs on the days of our visits in the first phase of the study. Only 41 per cent of the parents of primary school children expressed satisfaction with the performance of teachers. In the case of the SSKs this figure was a more agreeable 64 per cent, still leaving considerable room for improvement. However, given the propensity of Bengalis to grumble (we speak from personal experience!), the attendance figures for SSKs provide some cause for hope. *Private tuition and class discrimination:* Although the government of West Bengal's recent banning of private tuition by school teachers has been hailed (and denounced in some quarters) as a radical measure, it needs to be noted that private tuition at the primary level is different, in kind, from the private tuition imparted at higher levels. At the primary level it is not usually the teachers themselves, but others not subject to the ban who fulfil this task.

Only the relatively well-off and influential parents in rural areas can afford private tuition. As their children are provided for in this way, parental pressure on the teachers in government primary schools to provide quality education is reduced. Economically disadvantaged children suffer a threefold discrimination. They are often neglected in their schools (see below) and their largely uneducated parents (and other family members) cannot help them with lessons at home. Also their poverty puts private tuition beyond reach.

As Amartya Sen has argued, "Free education has ceased to be a right of all children, particularly because of the artificially generated need for private tuition".<sup>7</sup> Among children from classes 3 and 4, it was observed in the first phase of our study that only 20 per cent of children without access to private tuition could write their names correctly. For those tutored privately the figure was 80 per cent. Though our sample size was relatively small, the dependence of parents on private tuition for educating their wards has been confirmed through further enquiries.

In the second phase of our study, we assessed the levels of learning of 211 children from classes 2 to 4. We found that 55 (26 per cent) received no help, either at home or from private tutors and this fact helps explain why only 29 per cent of these children could read, write and do simple sums. On the other hand, of the 121 children whose parents were able to arrange for private tuition, the corresponding figure was 67 per cent. Among the economically backward daily wage earners, only 29 per cent could afford private tuition and just 33 per cent of their wards were able to read, write and do simple sums.

It comes as no surprise therefore, that only 28 per cent of parents in the first phase of our study and 25 per cent in the second said that private tuition was unnecessary. Of these, nearly all said that the poor quality of education at the primary level fuelled this need for private tuition. The poor quality of education means that one of the major achievements of the government – making elementary education free – has been undermined. It is also adversely affecting the potential for the universalisation of primary education generated by parents' higher aspirations for the education of their children.<sup>8</sup>

The dependence on private tuition has also reduced the positive achievements of the Left regime in narrowing class divisions in West Bengal. One deprivation brings forth another. It is education that could have reduced the disparities between the classes, yet it is education that seems to be widening them.

Even those who provide their children with private help do so with utmost difficulty. No less than 60 per cent said that they

face considerable hardship. Many depend upon borrowing and suffer elsewhere in order to afford private tuition. In many cases, such borrowing is related to near-feudal forms of exploitation. One labourer in Bardhaman was made to work at a very low daily rate during the rainy season, when wages are much higher, for the employer who had lent him the money.

### Poor Quality and Widening Class Differences

*Parents' frustration:* When asked about how his son was doing in primary school, a respondent from Puruliya bitterly referred to the class differentiation in the primary schooling system. He spoke of his poor peasant background and said he did not expect his son to do well in school for two reasons. First, the quality of teaching in the primary schools is very bad, teachers' absenteeism is very high and more importantly teachers – whatever little time they spend in the school – only take care of the children of the babu families. This, coupled with the inherited illiteracy of the family, leaves the child helpless both in the school and at home. Second, the child's father simply cannot afford the cost of private tuition.

Thus, children of the underprivileged families are discriminated against at different levels and are often left out of the schooling system. As Amartya Sen has argued, a child from such a background "not only loses the opportunities he or she could have had, but also adds to the massive waste of talents that is a characteristic of the life of our country".<sup>9</sup> The experience of the Puruliya peasant was reiterated by almost all the daily wage labourers and poor farmers interviewed during the course of the study.

*Poor people suffer:* The most deprived children barely expect square meals, let alone private tuition. Few children from families of daily wage earners receive help from private tutors and most do not get assistance at home as their parents and other relatives have low levels of education. This often generates a fear of doing poorly in school, which can lead to absenteeism. The poor attendance rate in primary schools is not due to purely economic factors or others external to the schooling system. Many of the children we interviewed did not attend school largely because of teachers' absenteeism, teachers' attitudes and the school environment.

The higher attendance rate at the SSKs (64 per cent) indicates that a sympathetic approach on the part of teachers can help bring the children from underprivileged sections of society into the fold of the primary schooling system. It should be mentioned here that the SSKs have no buildings of their own and many run in verandahs, cowsheds or beneath trees. Most are located in the areas inhabited by the poor scheduled caste and scheduled tribe communities. The 'sahayikas' (that is, the teachers at the SSKs) are paid considerably less than primary schoolteachers (1,000 rupees per month, while the primary schoolteachers now receive seven or eight times more, thanks to the public sector pay negotiation). While this problem may be hard to eliminate given the financial constraints, the deprivation of other facilities makes the working opportunities unacceptably unequal.

Why do the sahayikas perform better, despite their poorer pay and the much worse working conditions? This question was investigated.

The two most important reasons that emerged as explanations are (a) accountability to the local community (sahayikas' services are subject to the continuing approval of managing committees

– which include parents – constituted for every SSK), and (b) the minimal difference, in terms of class, between the sahayikas and the underprivileged children (“The sahayikas treat the children as their own” was a statement frequently made by parents).

On the other hand, 80 per cent of the teachers in the primary schools we visited expressed the preconceived notion that children from poorer backgrounds cannot do well in terms of education since their home environment is not conducive to studying. (Comments such as “there is nobody to assist them”, “they are engaged in many different kinds of work by their parents”, “parents don’t value education” were common among teachers; besides specifically expressed statements of class prejudice such as “they are filthy”, “they eat cows, rats, frogs”, and so on.)

The sympathetic attitude of the sahayikas has not only raised the attendance of the children generally, but has also, most importantly, drawn more girls into the primary schooling system. While in the primary schools the percentage of enrolled girls is less than that of boys, it is just the opposite in the SSKs. There are many factors that contribute to this high female enrolment, including the timing, which is generally scheduled in consultation with the village communities. Perhaps the most important factor, however, is the teachers’ dedication to bringing the children into the schooling system, something that seems to be often lacking among the primary school teachers. In the second phase of our study we found that when a child is absent from school, sahayikas seek an explanation from the child’s parents in 95 per cent of cases, while the comparative figure for primary schoolteachers is just 55 per cent.

Moreover, it is possible that in a patriarchal society such as is found in rural West Bengal, women, as a deprived group themselves, are more sympathetic to the woes of other underprivileged or deprived people, with whom they perceive bonds of solidarity. Despite their low pay, sahayikas find the experience of working outside the domestic confines (many for the first time) liberating and empowering. Even their small salary adds to this sense of empowerment. This is translated into greater sympathy for the children from poor and low caste backgrounds and positively affects the performance of sahayikas as educators.

### Quality and Social Dimension

The quality of education delivered in the primary schooling system is not only important from a class point of view, but also points towards the complex nature of Indian society where “class is not the only source of inequality, and interest in class as a source of disparity has to be placed within a bigger picture that includes other divisive influences: gender, caste, religion, community, and so on” [Sen 2001].

*Gender:* In the primary schools that we studied the attendance of the girl children was less than that of the boys. This is directly related to wider gender discrimination in society. Of the total number of primary school teachers only 25 per cent are women<sup>10</sup> and because of the uneven distribution across schools, most of the schools have no female teachers at all. Many of the teachers admitted that girls, particularly of classes of 3 and 4, do not always feel comfortable with the male teachers. Secondly, many of the male teachers share the perception that girls are less intelligent than boys. Similarly, the pitiable condition of the SSKs in terms of infrastructure and inadequate incentive arrangements particularly affects the opportunities for girls, as their potential for accessing primary education through SSKs is much better.

*Caste and ethnicity:* The condition of the SSKs also provides evidence of caste and ethnic discrimination. Since most of the SSKs are located in the places inhabited by the scheduled caste and scheduled tribe communities, whose children have little access to the primary schooling system, it was upsetting to note the condition of the housing arrangements of the SSKs. In most we visited, many of the children learn their lessons standing outside. While establishing an SSK in such place is in itself a positive step, the step can be made much more effective if facilities are expanded.

There are other features of comparative deprivation. The government primary schools are facilitated with incentive schemes, such as the dry ration of food, free uniforms for a section of girl students and free textbooks. The SSKs, which are filled with the poorest of the scheduled caste and scheduled tribe children, many of whom come to school on empty stomachs, are not covered under these schemes. Only the free textbook scheme is in force in the SSKs and even here, many of the SSKs in our study reported that they do not receive any free textbooks and some receive them in inadequate numbers.

There is further evidence of caste and ethnic discrimination in the primary schools (and, to a lesser extent, the SSKs). This includes ignoring the presence of children from low caste backgrounds, making them sit separately (or accepting separate seating as ‘chale aschhe’ – part of tradition), making derogatory remarks about the children of scheduled caste and scheduled tribe families and assuming that they simply cannot acquire education. This discrimination repels such children from the primary schooling system and forces them into forming the uneducated underclass of society. In our study, we found that 80 per cent of the agricultural labourers come from the scheduled caste and scheduled tribe communities. And 74 per cent of the scheduled caste and scheduled tribe families belong to the categories of landless and agricultural wage earners.

*Medium of instruction:* Without denying the fact that most children in West Bengal will stand to benefit from learning Bangla, we need to remember that as far as possible, the mother tongue should be the medium of instruction, at least at the primary level.

This has been recognised in the case of Nepali and Urdu (whose speakers constitute 1.3 and 2.2 per cent of the state’s population, according to the 1981 Census). Yet the same effort has not been made with regard to Santali, despite its official recognition and the fact that the Santals make up nearly 3 per cent of the population of West Bengal. Many of the children from Santal and the Santali-speaking, Kora tribes told us that they didn’t understand their teachers. When we spoke to teachers, they often dismissed their students’ language in a highly derogatory manner – further increasing this mutual incomprehension.

*Primary education and social change:* The complex interrelationships between issues of class, caste, gender, ethnicity, religious orientation, and other discriminatory factors need to be taken into account if we want to make the primary education system really free for all children. Only then can it help to eradicate both illiteracy and social discrimination. The Kerala experience, as Drèze and Sen observe, “powerfully brings out the dialectical relationship between educational progress and social change: the spread of education helps to overcome the traditional inequalities of caste, class and gender, just as the removal of these contributes to the spread of education” [Dreze and Sen 2002]. Education not only helps to overcome the inequalities between the castes, or gender or ethnic groups, but

also has the potential to remove the inequalities within them.

For example, gender discrimination is apparent among some tribal societies. In our study while the male-female ratio of enrolment (in primary schools) among other groups and scheduled castes was 55:45 and 56:44 respectively, the ratio among the scheduled tribes was 77:23. This discrimination, however, should not be seen in isolation. It is an overall increase in literacy and the spread of education that can bring change.

### Teachers and Quality of Schooling

The poor quality of schooling is often attributed to low numbers of teachers and poor facilities. Recent data from the Department of School Education, government of West Bengal, provides some support to this diagnosis. The student-teacher ratio stood at 54:1 at the end of September 2000: much higher than the desired ratio of 40:1 adopted by the government of West Bengal. There was an average of three teachers per school and the uneven nature of the distribution of teachers in schools has perhaps made the problem more acute.<sup>11</sup> The lack of trained teachers could be another area of concern. In 1999, only 65 per cent of teachers were trained and this represents only a negligible increase since 1986, when the figure was 64 per cent [Seetharaman 2002].

The underrepresentation of teachers from a class, caste, religion and gender point of view is also a cause for concern, as it is not only academic skill that matters. We have earlier discussed the small proportion of female teachers. In addition, the profession seems to be dominated by caste Hindu males.<sup>12</sup> A lot more dedication and a sympathetic attitude are needed from teachers, since they are particularly important for the improvement of educational quality, especially for underprivileged groups.

### Incentive Schemes

Several incentive schemes have been introduced by the government of West Bengal to encourage the expansion of primary education in the state. These include the mid-day meal scheme (which, in actual practice, is administered as a monthly dole of uncooked rice), the free textbook scheme and the free uniform scheme for a significant number of girl students.

The mid-day meal scheme has a direct impact on both the quality of education and children's health. The present scheme of distributing three kilograms of uncooked rice per month per child, both parents and teachers agree, has no effective impact on attendance since the distribution takes place once every three or four months. The rice was also often reported to be of sub-standard quality. Seventy-eight per cent of the parents interviewed feel that a proper mid-day meal scheme should be launched.

While in many villages, particularly among the general caste communities, we noticed a dislike of and inhibition towards the food served in the ICDS centres, it was just the opposite in villages inhabited by scheduled tribe communities. In one village, despite the presence of an SSK, children above six years of age were kept outside the schooling system by their parents. On enquiring the reason for this we were given an astonishing reply by one of the parents – a child admitted to the SSK stood to lose the food (a little pulp made of flour) she received at the ICDS centre, hence she was kept in the Anganwadi well beyond the age when she should have been admitted to the SSK!

The absence of a properly administered mid-day meal scheme is more strongly felt in the SSKs, which are mainly attended by

children from poorer communities. Given the state government's paucity of resources, it may find it difficult to serve prepared meals, but this is a scheme that can bring a sea change among the children of the poorer communities in terms of their level of achievement in the primary education sector.<sup>13</sup>

The other incentive schemes (namely, distribution of free textbooks to all primary school-going children and free uniforms to all scheduled caste, scheduled tribe and 25 per cent of the poorest among other girl students) have had a very positive effect on primary education in the state, given the poverty levels of the poorest students. However, the exclusion of SSKs from the free uniform scheme and the poor distribution of textbooks in the SSKs have their class implications. The poorest of the poor are deprived of the benefits they need the most.

### Governance

One of the most important findings of our study was the poor governance and supervision of the primary schooling system in West Bengal. In most of the schools we surveyed, inspection had not taken place for more than a year prior to our visits. Even teachers admitted that inspection was a mere formality, when done at all. School inspectors have their own set of grievances. They say that they are overburdened and apprehensive of the teachers' unions' reactions if they report unfavourably about any primary school. Thus, quite often they simply do not visit the schools they are supposed to inspect.

Parents, who could keep a close vigil on the governance of primary schools, are largely excluded from the monitoring system. Only 36 per cent of parents said that they were aware of parent-teacher meetings in the schools. For the SSKs, the figure is much higher at 60 per cent. In fact, the relative success of the SSKs is to a considerable extent due to the parents' involvement in the monitoring and governance of these institutions. Mothers in particular, as the respondents reported, can approach the *sahayikas* and ask about their wards' progress. By passing parents' involvement in the system of governance can prove to be counterproductive.<sup>14</sup>

A primary schoolteacher occupies a position of power and respect in the community. According to a primary schoolteacher present in the workshop organised by Pratichi, parents, and particularly those who come from the underprivileged sections of the society, gave evidence of being overwhelmed simply when a teacher spoke to them in a friendly manner. Many of the parents complained that teachers do not even listen to them, let alone consult them. Parents seem to regard primary schoolteachers as largely indifferent and teachers accuse parents of not caring enough to come to them with their problems.

The problem of governance, in fact, has a dialectical relationship with the quality of education. In some exemplary schools, the teachers' dedication towards their duties has not only been successful in delivering a much better quality of education but has also attracted parents to school governance, which has led to further improvement. Parents in such schools have contributed a lot in terms of infrastructure and other development. Experiences elsewhere, for example in Karnataka, have shown that parents' participation in the schooling system can be an important contribution to the improvement of the quality of education [Maithili 2002].

Such examples are regrettably few in number. This is probably explained by the defective formulation of the idea of public

participation initiated by the government through the Village Education Committees (VECs). The VECs, which are not school specific bodies (a VEC is formed in a 'gram sansad'), have little room for parent members. Very often, the powerful political parties in their respective areas take over the VECs and, consequently, their functioning is far from satisfactory. We have come across some VEC members who themselves were not even aware of their being committee members! In a complete mockery of democratic values, one VEC was found to have the same person nominated as both secretary and president. Another shortcoming of the VECs is that they are largely headed by and composed of members from the powerful sections of the society, leaving out the underprivileged, precisely those who desire – and need – just representation in such a body.

This desire found strong expression when parents were asked to give their opinion on the idea of a school-specific, parent-teacher committee with legal powers to make school grants conditional to the sanction of such committees. An overwhelming majority of the parents welcomed the idea and also suggested that these committees must have representation of parents from all sections of society – on the basis of class, caste, gender, and so on.

The present system of governance of the primary schools, as experienced by the parents, has already built up among them a sense of deprivation and alienation that must be eradicated. The involvement of parents can assure both quality and quantity in the field of primary education.

## Conclusion

Primary education in West Bengal, as all over the country, suffers from many deficiencies including problems of infrastructure, shortage of schools, shortage of teachers, the financial handicap of the parents, and so on. These deficiencies have long been recognised and formed part of the popular discourse on the shortcomings of primary education in the state. Our study, however, has focused on the qualitative aspect of the delivery of primary education and it is clear that here too, there is a long way to go. Improving infrastructure and the student-teacher ratio while important, do not in themselves provide a guarantee of improvement in either the quality or the spread of primary education. There are several important factors that need, in addition, to be addressed with some urgency. Four such issues are discussed below.

First, parents' participation in monitoring and governance is key to improving the delivery of primary education. A representative parent-teacher committee with members from all sections of society having legal powers to make the renewal of school appropriations conditional on their approval should be constituted in every primary educational institution (schools as well as SSKs). The governance of primary schools and SSKs should be devolved as far as possible to the hands of local communities and they must be freed from bureaucratic and political interference.

Second, the success of the government of West Bengal's SSK experiment in providing cost-effective primary education, particularly to the most underprivileged sections of society must be recognised. However, the administration of and support to the SSKs need further improvement. To begin with, SSK *sahayikas* must be recognised as educators in their own right. The term *sahayika*, which means 'helper', and has connotations of inferiority when contrasted to '*sikshak*' ('teacher'), should be rethought and SSK teachers should not be confused with 'para-teachers',

given particularly that the minimum qualifications for becoming an SSK teacher are the same as for a primary school teacher. The irregularity in the frequency of payments to the SSK teachers must be rectified in order to give due respect to the important role they play in the delivery of primary education.

Similarly, the benefits of all the incentive schemes presently in force in primary schools need to be extended to the children studying in SSKs and these need to be properly administered. The lack of facilities is particularly acute in the SSKs and steps need to be taken to at least bring them in line with primary schools. Since community involvement was found to be much greater in the SSKs (as compared to primary schools) this need not involve too heavy a financial commitment on part of the government.

Third, the mid-day meal scheme (with cooked food) must become a proper means for providing adequate nutrition to children of all primary education institutions (schools as well as SSKs) in addition to the encouragement it gives to school attendance. Given that there is a direct correlation between levels of nutrition and educational achievement, this needs to be implemented on a priority basis.

Finally, the evil of private tuition must be uncompromisingly eradicated and legal steps alone cannot achieve this. To ensure that free primary education is available to all children – a fundamental right granted to them by the Constitution of India – there has to be a qualitative improvement in the delivery of primary education, something that can be achieved through teachers' dedication, parents' cooperation and participation and proper inspection on part of the government. **[EW]**

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## Notes

[The authors are grateful to Amartya Sen and Jean Drèze for their invaluable comments. The authors are also indebted to Subhrangsu Santra, Soumik Mukherjee, Arabinda Nandy, Arindam Mukherjee and, especially, Rosanne Flynn, for reading and commenting on an earlier draft of this essay. The usual disclaimers apply.]

- 1 The Pratichi (India) Trust and the Pratichi (Bangladesh) Trust were set up in 1999 by Amartya Sen, on the basis of the Nobel Prize award to him, with "the general aim of working towards the removal of illiteracy and ignorance, lack of basic health care, and the special disadvantages from which women (particularly young girls) suffer".
- 2 For details see Rana, Rafique, Sengupta, *The Pratichi Education Report* with an introduction by Amartya Sen (2002). The first phase of the study was conducted in May-June 2001 and a follow-up study in the same villages conducted in January-February 2002. The second phase of the study in three more districts was carried out during March-July 2002.
- 3 Report of the Education Commission (1992); Government of West Bengal, popularly known as the Ashok Mitra [Commission's] Report; Annual Report, Department of School Education (2001), Government of West Bengal; *Economic Review 2001-2002*, Also see *The Pratichi Education Report* (2002).
- 4 The Education Commission headed by Ashok Mitra observed that, "most children go through the phase of primary education without acquiring the knowledge and skills they were expected to acquire". See also Shariff and Sudarshan (1996); Nambissan and Sedwal (2002); Sujatha (2002); Nayar (2002); Ramachandran and Saihjee (2002); Chattopaddhaya et al (1998) for an all-India perspective.
- 5 Under this programme, according to the Economic Review 2001-2002, Government of West Bengal, 11,077 Sishu Siksa Kendras have been established in the state. As on September 2001 there were 21,719 *Sahayikas* appointed for the SSKs with a total enrolment of 7,48,189, which was about 8 per cent of the total enrolment in the primary classes (calculated from the figures given in the Economic Review and in the Annual Report mentioned above).

- 6 The workshop, focusing on the role of parents and teachers in the delivery of primary education, was held at Bolpur on 6 July 2002, with the participation of parents and teachers from primary schools and SSKs of 36 villages from six districts of West Bengal.
- 7 Introduction to *The Pratichi Education Report*, p 10.
- 8 High levels of parental aspiration are also found in other states, even in educationally backward ones (see the PROBE report – Public Report on Basic Education, 1999). The NCAER data collected for the UNDP Human Development Report also yield a similar picture. See Shariff, Abusaleh and Ratna M Sudarshan, 'Elementary Education and Health in Rural India: Some Indices' in Rao, Nitya, Luise Rurup and R Sudarshan (1996).
- 9 Amartya Sen, Dorab Tata Memorial Lectures, Lecture 1: India and the World (2001).
- 10 The all-India figure is much better, though far from being equitable. It was 32.68 per cent in 1996-97 (see Yadav et al, 2002).
- 11 The chairperson of a District Primary Education Council told us that despite several efforts, the distribution of the teachers could not be done equitably in that district because of the pressure from the teachers' unions. While in the primary schools of the remote areas there are many schools run by single teachers, in the schools located in the urban and semi urban areas there is often an excess number of teachers.
- 12 For this see Chattopadhyay et al (1998).
- 13 We may also note here that the government of West Bengal, like those of most other states in the country, has so far not implemented the Supreme Court order to serve a prepared daily meal to all primary school children. In May 2001, the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), Rajasthan, filed a petition on the 'right to food' in the Supreme Court of India. The petition demanded that India's gigantic food stocks to be used without further delay to prevent hunger. The Supreme Court passed a significant 'interim order' on 28 November 2001 directing all state governments and union territories to serve 300 calories of prepared food to all children of government-run and government-assisted primary schools.
- 14 For example, in some of the villages the SSKs have been made to follow a government order of keeping their timing in conformity with the timing of the primary schools. The government order was contrary to the need and wishes of the local communities involved. Such an order has caused a sharp decline in the attendance of the children since the new timing – involving the whole day and contrary to the timing fixed by the local communities – did not suit the children who are engaged in economic activities during the day.

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