

Primary Schools in West Bengal

The Delivery of Primary Education: A Study in West Bengal (The Pratichi Education Report) by Kumar Rana, Abdur Rafique and Amrita Sengupta (with an Introduction by Amartya Sen); TLM Books in association with Pratichi (India) Trust, New Delhi, 2002; pp 127, Rs 150.00 (\$5.0).

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One of the major problems of state controlled primary education in India relates to its operation and management especially in the context of bringing first generation learners into the fold of schooling. "Extensive inefficiencies in operation in general are reinforced by particular inequities in the failure to provide fair opportunity to children from less privileged background", notes Amartya Sen in his introductory remarks to the Pratichi Education Report. The report, the first to come out from the Pratichi Trust, comprehensively describes the core problems afflicting the primary school in India through a field based study in West Bengal. Although the report is based on

a research undertaken on a small sample of primary schools (18 primary schools and 17 'Shishu Shiksha Kendras' (SSKs), an alternative system devised by the West Bengal government for school-less small habitations) in three districts (Birbhum, Medinipur and Puruliya) in West Bengal with a caution against wide generalisation mentioned in the introduction itself, the findings are in tune with those arrived at by a few other recent studies based on fieldwork in various parts of the country,¹ and hence can be taken as reflecting general situation to a large extent.

The report highlights the fact that despite being ahead of many other states on many development initiatives such as land reforms and role of panchayats in local governance, and also better performances in terms of decline in rate of population growth and positive change in sex-ratio, West Bengal stands somewhere lower when it comes to literacy rates and schooling participation positions. As per 2001 Census, West Bengal with a literacy rate of about 69 per cent stood at 18th position among 35 Indian states and union territories (it was 19th in 1991). The gross enrolment for 6-11 year age-group (relevant for primary schooling) was 85.60 per cent and the net enrolment was only 40.2

per cent in 1997-98. The drop-out rate for the same period was about 36 per cent for boys and 41 per cent for girls (p 14).

The report raises several issues that need to be addressed if the fundamental right of universal access to elementary education is to be taken more seriously and universalisation of elementary education, expressed as an explicit goal of the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* – the latest government of India scheme, is to be achieved by 2010. One of the most critical issues pertains to class and caste barriers that exist in schools/classrooms and act as a major impediment in schooling participation of children from poorer and less privileged families. With large-scale expansion of the school system and especially with opening of SSKs in small habitations, enrolment of children from poorer families, including those belonging to SC, ST and Muslim households, has increased significantly during the last decade. However, their regular attendance and continuation in the school remains an issue.

Teachers, majority of them coming from general caste, showed a poor opinion of these children's interest in studies and their ability to learn. They usually think that "the SC and ST children are less motivated than the others, more timid, and finally less intelligent than the general caste students" (p 73). Biased statements about Muslim children were also common (pp 32, 73). Teachers' lack of sensitivity in understanding difficult circumstances of these children facing hunger and having to contribute to family's efforts to earn a livelihood, and also facing a problem in language (home language being different from mainstream Bengali spoken and taught by teachers) stands out as a common feature. The report, however, also recognises a few individual teachers' efforts to reach across the class barriers but these cases remain exceptions. The incidence of teacher absenteeism was recorded to be high in schools with a majority of children from SC and ST (75 per cent) as compared to other schools (33 per cent).

The report records high aspirations and interest in education showed by parents in general though this was not always true for parents of girls. The report also records several incidences of children not having been enrolled or dropped out or not attending school regularly on account of hunger and other poverty related factors. What comes across is that even if the demand for education is an issue (though the report does not say so), it is not due to disinterest

in education but because of objective situations related to poverty and survival on one hand, and insensitive nature and poor quality of delivery processes on the other. High level of teacher absenteeism, poor functioning of schemes such as textbooks (these do not reach in time) and mid-day meal (a misnomer as cooked meals are not served), poor quality of teaching and monitoring, lack of language preparedness of teachers to teach in areas where mainstream language is not spoken, insensitive behaviour and low expectations from children belonging to SC, ST and Muslim communities, rigid school calendar and timings, poor functioning of accountability mechanisms such as inspection, Village Education Committees and parent-teacher meetings – all these indicate a system of management and delivery not enabling enough to encourage schooling participation of children from less privileged sections.

The study highlights the fact that SSKs are functioning better than formal primary schools in sample areas. The incidence of teacher absenteeism was lower (14 per cent on the days of visits as against 20 per cent in primary schools) and that of students' attendance high (64 per cent on the days of visits as against 51 per cent in primary schools) in SSKs. A more conducive student teacher relationship and a higher level of parental participation in school-related matters was noted in SSKs. This is despite the fact that SSK teachers are paid a much lower salary (Rs 1,000 per month as compared to an average of Rs 5,000-10,000 for a primary school teacher), SSKs have very poor physical infrastructure and many incentive schemes are not operational. This has been attributed to all teachers being local women, their role definition which requires them to contact parents frequently and also to bring children to schools, and an in-built local accountability system which allows greater role for local community. It is a significant observation in view of such schooling opportunities expanding in many parts of the country. Although there cannot be two opinions regarding the need for upgrading the payment levels and infrastructural facilities in SSKs and similar initiatives elsewhere, the need for changing the orientation, role-definition and accountability mechanisms of teachers in mainstream systems is also clear.

Even though the report does not overtly acknowledge the fact that poor level of students' attendance in both primary schools and SSKs reflect existence of the need for measures to convert parental aspirations into firm commitment to their

children's education, the findings provide enough indicatives that a sensitive teacher who feels accountable to local community plays an important role in improving children's attendance rate and eventually, their learning. At the same time it is also true that it would not be fair to expect teachers alone to change without changing the functioning of the entire school-system which remains bureaucratic and centralised. The study warns against the centralist role of the government, political parties and panchayats as a 'threat to continuing efficiency and performance of the SSKs' (p 119).

Universal presence of private tuition and its role in widening the class barriers in terms of access to learning facilities have been stressed by the study. Private tuition is viewed as a 'necessity' considering the poor quality of teaching in primary schools. Parents' view is upheld by the fact that "only 7 per cent of children in classes three and four who are not facilitated by private tutors could write their names correctly" (p 31). Those who are not taking private tuitions are those who cannot afford this additional expenditure and without fail belong to poor SC and ST families (p 32). The report acknowledges the West Bengal government's decision to ban private tuitions by primary school teachers and advocates other measures to improve the quality in schools so that it becomes redundant.

It comes as no surprise that the first report from the newly set up Pratiche (India) Trust focuses on the issue of delivery of primary education. The Pratiche Trusts have been instituted in India and Bangladesh with the money received by Amartya Sen as part of the Nobel prize and aim at working towards the general removal of illiteracy and ignorance, the lack of basic health care, and the special disadvantages from which women (particularly young girls) suffer. The language of the report is simple and communicative, making it easy for practitioners to read and respond. There is a definite need for more such initiatives and we could expect the Trust to come with more policy-oriented researches in areas concerning education, health and gender issues. **PTW**

Note

- 1 See *Public Report on Basic Education (PROBE)* (1999), Oxford University Press, New Delhi; *Gender and Social Equity in Primary Education: Hierarchies of Access* (2002), Vimala Ramachandran, The European Union, New Delhi and *Elementary Education for the Poorest and Other Deprived Groups: The Real Challenge of Universalisation* (2002), Jyotsna Jha and Dhir Jhingran, Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi.