

# In Defence of Public Education

## Voices from Bengal

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Drawing on the research on basic education in West Bengal, this essay argues the case for a much criticised public education system, which needs to be reconsidered as regards its potential as a provider of quality education, even while addressing its many failings. The essay follows an approach, both critical and constructive, that underlines the collective onus of the public in realising the value of the public education system, instead of giving up on it.

We are most grateful to Amartya Sen for his intellectual stewardship that inspires Pratichi's work. We also acknowledge the able academic and research support of the entire Pratichi research team, especially of Sangram Mukherjee, Muklesur Rahman Gain, Subhra Das, Pranabesh Maiti, Priyanka Nandy and Toa Bagchi. We are grateful to Choten Lama and Vikram Sen, and the department of school education and Paschim Banga Sarva Shiksha Mission for all their cooperation and generous help. We record our appreciation of the sustained support and encouragement from Antara Dev Sen that has made Pratichi research possible. Any remaining errors remain our sole responsibility.

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**T**his essay, in the defence of public education, comes at a time when many are losing their faith in public education and are aggressively looking for "private solutions to public deficiencies". Drawing on available research and empirical evidence on basic education primarily in West Bengal but also in other parts of eastern India, we set out to argue that public education needs to be both, valued for its equity enhancing potentials and improved to address and ameliorate its many failings. Our focus here is on the government-run elementary school system, although we readily acknowledge that public engagement and action in the area of education may certainly go beyond governmental action to include public-spirited educational activities of different civic groups active both in West Bengal and the country at large. Our approach is both critical and constructive; we underline our collective onus to solve public educational shortcomings through the mainstay of public vision, understanding and action, instead of giving up on the public school system in favour of individualised, privatised and exclusionary alternatives.

### The Distinction and the Burden of Public Education

Echoing Barber (1997), we claim that it is both the distinction and the burden of public education that it has to cater, in principle, to all – the indigent and the advantaged – in randomly and socially mixed schools. That in practice we see a non-random sorting of disadvantaged and privileged children into government and private schools, respectively, is the imprint of segmentation and inequality in our education system that we need to reduce, and not reproduce.

Government schools provide that vital social space in which background social

prejudices and inequalities are encountered, and not brushed aside. In several meetings with teachers and parents organised in many areas of Bengal, teachers have candidly discussed how they often find themselves at the eye of the storm that surrounds the running of the school meal programme – teachers are often called "rice thieves" – and how caste and communal biases flare up on the issue of who will cook the meal and who all will eat it. Teachers express concerns about gendered social norms of early marriage that render the educational right a "precarious right" for girl students, who keep dropping out under social pressure. A public institution like the government school allows such concerns to be aired, creating a possibility for it to be less gendered than the home. Also as schooling expands among the hitherto excluded, relatively better-placed and better-off teachers increasingly come into contact with the children of social underdogs in public classrooms.

Although such contact does not necessarily bridge the social distance between the teacher and the taught, and sadly may even reinforce it at times, there are real-life situations in which teachers acknowledge and empathise with the predicaments of poorer children who people their classrooms, and more crucially, revise their (mis)judgment influenced, in turn, by strong stereotypes about the "in-educability" of the so-called "first-generation learners".

A teacher working in a government elementary school articulates his personal struggle thus: "Many of my students lack proper food and clothing. The condition is even worse during the winter. When a small child shivers in cold in the classroom wearing his single, thin, apparel, I feel guilty to stand before him, well protected with my sweater, socks and shoes" (Pratichi Institute 2012a).

A schoolteacher writes how moved she was when proven wrong in her assessment of a child thus: "A child from a poor family brought to class a poem she had written – 'As trees blossom, *Siuli* flowers bloom'. I was in tears. All this while, I had relegated her to the group of

'non-achievers'. This experience remains a precious moment of my teaching career" (*ibid*).

Such micro-level individual educational experiences gathered in government schools may help one contest the persistent belief that an education system catering largely to first-generation learners need not be too engaged or too devoted to its cause, since these students are incapable of learning much anyway. Thus, an inclusive, i.e., non-discriminating public school provides some room for the revisability of biased opinions and misjudgments that our society harbours about learning abilities of disadvantaged children and thereby calls into question, if not thoroughly unsettles, the structure of inequality within which our school system is embedded. Implicit in the enterprise of public education, therefore, there remains a political option for the pursuit of equity. The realisation of this option is, of course, contingent and not inevitable, but it is an option nonetheless, which is hardly available in privatised, already enclosed, and exclusionary domains.

### **Expansion of Elementary Education**

Field-based research in several districts of West Bengal has brought to the fore the promising expansion of schooling that has taken place in the state under the aegis of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). A number of lingering trouble spots notwithstanding, significant progress has been made in near-universalising enrolment at the primary level. In reducing primary-level dropout, too, considerable ground has been covered; the rate hovers around 4% now as compared to the corresponding figure of 10% a decade ago (District Information System for Education, West Bengal 2010-11). Considerable improvement is also evident in terms of new classrooms, toilets, and kitchen sheds that have been made; school meals are found to be regularly served in most of the schools surveyed, though there have been many complaints regarding the supply of provisions and systemic arrangements. The average rate of student attendance has improved – from a little above 50% in 2001 to

around 68% now – though a large spatial variation in this respect persists.

All this has contributed to greater functionality of schools; in 2001-02 the field investigators found most of the sampled schools to have opened late and closed early, and during their visits in 2008-09 and 2011-12, a majority of schools surveyed have been found to be functioning during most of the school hours, though some have closed early (Pratichi Trust 2009; Pratichi Institute 2012b). There have been some visibly encouraging changes in the "work culture" of the school and schoolteachers, partly due to consistent public scrutiny and criticism of school functionality – sometimes somewhat acrimonious and even less than fair. Yet, the upshot of all this public gaze and engagement has been to ask and examine more closely the first-order question of why the issue of basic education and its public support is significant at all. Indeed, the last decade has seen a palpable increase in public discussion on elementary education, while in the previous decade primary schools and their functioning received meagre attention from the media and the public at large, though there were some counter-examples.

The expansion of public provision has not only resulted in enhancing critical demand for education, but also in improving the level of students' learning achievements. As a study in 2001-02 confirmed, 30% of children from classes 3 and 4 were unable to read or write simple words such as their names; in more recent studies in 2008-09 and 2011-12, only 4% of children from classes 3 and 4 are found not to be able to read or write (*ibid*). At a time when government-run primary schools are routinely criticised for low learning levels of their pupils, such findings provide some cause for cheer. No doubt, there are still a large number of children studying in public schools who find it difficult to achieve a basic level of proficiency, and this is certainly a quality concern. But as we briefly discuss below, there are good reasons to argue that the imperative to improve student learning in public schools need not be symbolised only through boosting test scores – a tendency rapidly on

the rise in scholarly writings, policy analyses and public discourse.

### **Major Trouble Spots**

**Uneven Resource Allocation and the Question of 'Fair' Financing:** To focus on expanding and improving basic education is also to raise issues with both the effectiveness and fairness of public spending on basic education – the subject that we touch here only briefly. The fair use of the fiscal tool for a more equal school system is a particular area of concern, since uneven resource allocation and its lopsided actual utilisation appear, in a number of recent studies, as one of the major trouble spots of primary education in the state.

Allocated funds remain unspent or are spent ineffectively in some areas, while other regions are kept starved of essential support. What is worse this paradox of surfeit and shortage of resources, in a climate of the overall lack of resources, reveals a perverse pattern: schools in marginal areas that are in greater need of support and supplies – often serving adivasi, Muslim and dalit children – remain more resource-starved than those in relatively more privileged locations, evincing a clear policy bias in favour of better endowed schools operating in better locations and catering to children from comparatively better-off families. On the other side of the register, children in depressed regions go to schools having much less resources (Rana 2010). Commenting on the aggressive campaign worldwide in favour of "test-based accountability" of schools and teachers but the relative silence on the question of fair educational financing, Ravitch (2012) thus forcefully observes, "[It is held that]...there should be 'no excuses' for schools with low test scores...Someone must be held accountable if children cannot attain academic proficiency. That someone is invariably their teachers. Nothing is said about holding accountable the district leadership or the elected officials who determine such crucial issues as funding, class size, and resource allocation".

Poor public provision – in terms of school infrastructure, the number of

teachers, regularity of school inspections, and the supply of mid-day meal provisions – in the areas with lower levels of development is a major concern for equity in public spending in West Bengal, as evinced through analysis of both primary and secondary data. In particular, large variations exist in the stock of teachers across schools, and the shortage of teachers, as a study in six districts of north Bengal shows, is significantly higher in rural areas as compared to urban and peri-urban areas (Pratichi Institute 2012b). Also, schools in low-income neighbourhoods are relatively more starved of teachers. In north Bengal 41% of schools are found to have more teachers than required; in 31% of schools it is just the reverse. Only in 28% of schools there seems to be a balance between the requirement and availability (as per the Right to Education (RTE) norm).

All this, not surprisingly, results in wide variations in school functionality. For example, the average rate of school attendance among the children in north Bengal is found to be 60%, much lower than the corresponding figure of 75% in the districts of southern Bengal. The variation is palpably correlated with inadequate provision of school facilities in north Bengal (the expansion of which has begun only recently). Even among schools within the districts of north Bengal, wide variations in pupil attendance exist, ranging between 30% and 90%, having strong connections with the remoteness of school, the number of teachers in position, the frequency of school inspection, and the social accessibility of pupils to their teachers. The issue of erratic school attendance of the teacher and the taught cannot be adequately and independently addressed without paying heed to the issue of "fair" financing of public education in the "neglected areas" spread over vast tracts of the state – from tea gardens in north Bengal to the plateau of West Medinipur, Bankura and Purulia.

**Inspection Rather Than Academic Supervision:** In northern districts of Bengal, the school inspection system was found to be quite weak. A large

number of schools were not even inspected once in a year. More precisely, 39% of surveyed schools were found to have had no inspection in last six months, and 27% with no inspection in the last one year (Pratichi Trust 2009). The current state of affairs is unsurprising, considering the shortage of inspectors and their mandatory engagement with many different "duties". As things stand now, on an average, one inspector has to "look after" about 100 primary schools in the state. What is more, inspectors have traditionally been expected to perform the role of policing; they have not been oriented or trained to work as academic supervisors, facilitating and improving teachers' academic and instructional tasks and skills (also see, IIM Kolkata 2011). Hence, if and when they have managed to visit schools, they have remained faithful to their job description, i.e., inspection, that has resulted in a situation in which schools are both controlled and neglected – controlled under a hierarchical regime of top-down inspection but neglected in terms of much-needed academic supervision and assistance.

**Narrow 'Decision Space' for Teachers:** In curriculum design, preparation of syllabus, textbook selection, and choice

of appropriate pedagogic practices for a multilingual classroom, the "decision space" that the school system hands in to an "ordinary" teacher is limited and insignificant. Also, keeping the teaching force informed, as an equal partner, about major systemic developments in the field of education does not quite appear to be a priority of the school administration in the state. The information regarding the recently legislated Right to Education Act has not been properly disseminated by the state government among schoolteachers – the practising professionals who are supposed to shoulder the primary responsibility of delivering this right to children. A Bengali version of the Act has been prepared and its copies circulated among some schoolteachers by a few civic groups and research institutes. To give another quick example of the lack of information flow to schoolteachers, the state government had issued an order regarding the increase of the honorarium of the mid-day meal cook in April 2009, but the order did not reach some of the schools even in April 2011.

The need for a more substantive and professional involvement of teachers in curriculum and syllabus design has been underlined on many an occasion by

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schoolteachers themselves in different public meetings that Pratichi has organised over the years. For example, a teacher wondered,

A child who articulates his thoughts clearly while conversing with his friends, who picks up the rules of any new game nicely and promptly, fails only to follow classroom lessons. Why is it so? We are responsible to make a right choice of the textbooks for him so that they attract his imagination and attention. To that end, teachers are to be made part of this selection process (Pratichi Institute 2012a).

In spite of such narrow intellectual space for teachers to work within, in several of the workshops in which schoolteachers shared, in writing, their views and experiences, many inspiring examples of their pedagogic initiatives have sprung up, especially in dealing with the challenge of teaching children with multilingual backgrounds. In the revealing words of a teacher in the district of Jalpaiguri in West Bengal,

I speak neither the Rajbangshi dialect nor the Sadri dialect. How can I explain things to those whom I do not understand myself? I thought I must learn to follow both Rajbangshi and Sadri dialects in order to teach my students Bangla...I have managed to have some command over both the dialects by conversing with my students. In the course of teaching them I have turned out to be their student, and my students have become my teachers. Now I feel far closer to them (*ibid*).

At a time when teacher evaluation through student test scores is increasingly being seen as the main element of school improvement, such instances of effort, pedagogic contribution and democratic attitude should inform our understanding of what a well-rounded teacher evaluation may look like. Indeed, careful documentation, wide dissemination and recognition of innovative classroom practices taken up by a sizeable section of teachers is essential, possibly through Circle Level Resource Centres (CLRCs) and Block Level Resource Centres (BLRCs), and then via higher education authorities. In the process, CLRCs and BLRCs may also be perked up as a real platform for professional networking and exchange among educators and teachers. Such recognition, we may add, is not for ranking or rating of teachers, but for learning

from them about their creative school practices and their effective engagement with the community of parents.

**Neglect of Teacher Preparation:** In the succinct words of Kumar (2008), "Teacher training can be quite accurately described as the centre of India's educational depression". Fortunately, there is a growing emphasis on the centrality of teachers' education, preparation and training to improve classroom practice and achieve the desired level of quality in school education, though the importance and quality of university preparation of teachers merits much greater attention. However, the actual delivery of the training is widely considered less than adequate. For example, both the academic content of teacher education programmes and the infrastructural base of the existing teacher training institutes in the state need to be strengthened manifold, along with the setting up of newer ones. According to a conservative estimate, there is a need for at least 300 training institutes in West Bengal.

A team of researchers attended several teachers' training sessions in English, mathematics and environmental science organised under the aegis of the SSA to observe the processes of the training. The aim was to evaluate those processes pedagogically and also as a mode of interaction – likely to be fraught with unequal power relations – between schoolteachers, "teachers of teachers" and other education functionaries placed at different levels of a hierarchical school education system. The in-service teachers' training tended to have taken a conventional line, and more disappointingly, the impact of the training imparted, in many cases, dried out before reaching the classroom (Pratichi Institute 2012b).

Some teachers saw training sessions as opportunities to harvest useful advice and adopt better teaching practices; others were less enthusiastic. Many among the latter resented somewhat the "fact" that rather "authoritarian" trainers were instructing their colleagues in more "democratic" pedagogy. Also, some teachers viewed the training as a "one-way" flow

of information and advice, and as orders imposed on them by a higher authority without considering their many constraints. As a teacher remarked, "School education authorities see us – the primary schoolteachers – as immature children, in need of detailed guidance. They expect us to obey their orders down to the last word."

**Curriculum Overload:** There is ample empirical evidence to highlight the need for redesigning the existing curriculum to both reduce its excessive load as well as address the challenge of linguistic diversity in the classroom in many parts of Bengal. This is particularly the case in northern and western regions of the state. It is to be noted that many children in West Bengal are not quite fluent in Bangla. In such a multicultural and multi-ethnic environment, an "overambitious curriculum", with a clear leaning towards Bangla, starts off with some initial disadvantages for children speaking in dialects other than Bangla. Tagore warned us long ago that "an overburdened *Dinghy* is likely to sink under its own weight with most of its payload". It is therefore not much of a surprise that children find it difficult to learn the basics. In their recent paper, Pritchett and Beatty (2012) have argued that part of the reason why many students spend many years in school with little progress made in learning the basics is because curricular paces move much faster than the pace of learning; "paradoxically", they conclude, "learning could go faster if curricula and teachers were to slow down".

This prompts us to return, albeit in a cursory manner, to the "quality imperative" in education. There is a growing tendency to define quality of schooling solely in terms of test scores of students and to hold teachers primarily culpable for students' achievement deficits, without paying adequate heed to the problem of curriculum overload.

This is not to deny that inequity of access to "good" education is real and that the quality imperative prevails. If eight years of elementary schooling translates into little learning as far as the basics are concerned, that is indeed a

cause for concern. But we need to, at once, stress that achievement and attainment are related. If children can be retained in school for eight years – “even if that means bringing them to a 6th grade level of knowledge” (Carnoy 2004) – that is a desirable pursuit. Instead of focusing only on higher test scores, we, therefore, may worry about extending students’ “school-life expectancy” demanding at once that they learn more and better. It is worth noting that no country in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) group has made significant increases in their maths and science scores of average students for a long period (Carnoy 2004).

Testing may certainly give information with respect to making teaching and learning useful for both teachers and students; but, harmful consequences ensue, as Ravitch convincingly claims (2012), “when tests become too consequential for students, teachers and schools, such as cheating, narrowing the curricula only to what is tested, or lowering standards to inflate scores”. Also, so much focus on test scores, and not on making curriculum less onerous, or on how via professional development of teachers a school can deliver improved

opportunity for learning to children, runs the risk of de-emphasising the need for improving teachers’ subject matter knowledge and pedagogic skills, which are crucial to improve teaching. And without improved teaching, it is hard to improve students’ academic achievement.

### **Improving Public Education: A Collective Task**

Addressing the malaise of public education is quintessentially a collective endeavour that demands, to borrow the classic idea of John Stuart Mill, “other-regarding” concerns and actions, and not just “self-regarding” pursuit of individual educational aspirations. There are many actors and many constituencies – local and supra-local – whose involvement in the task of school improvement is essential. In particular, research has revealed the importance of collaboration with (1) the community of parents, (2) teachers’ unions, and (3) the public at large (Halder and Rana 2010).

It is to be conceded that some of the policy-sponsored participatory spaces aimed at fostering greater community participation in matters of schooling, such as Mother Teacher Associations (MTAs), Village Education Committees (VECs)

and School Management Committees (SMCs), have not necessarily succeeded in enhancing people’s involvement in educational matters. Among various reasons for this somewhat disheartening development identified in several studies is that school administration has often transformed the idea of parental participation into a mere institutional ritual. In contrast, as many interactions with parents and community members in several workshops across the districts of Bengal indicate, when the participatory spaces (sometimes even MTAs and VECs) are “invented” and “claimed” for meaningful exchange of ideas between teachers and parents about school functioning and about children’s school attendance and learning needs, parents and teachers do engage under certain propitious conditions, in a collaborative effort. Of course, communities do not necessarily speak with a single voice; nor is their “wisdom” or information always faultless. But, when their keen interest in their children’s educational progress intersects productively with that of the schoolteacher, a real possibility is created for equitable access to good education.

For example, a teacher writes about the trust and affection of the people

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in the village in which his school is situated, "Some parents started visiting the school and said, 'Teacher, my child speaks of you all the time. Teach him well, scold him if necessary, but make sure he learns.' I said it wouldn't be necessary to scold him, just make sure that he doesn't miss school" (Pratichi Institute 2012a). Another teacher narrates eloquently a real life parent-teacher collaboration thus,

This was the occasion of the retirement of Shri Ashish Mishra – headmaster of Bhadua primary school (names changed). He would come to this village from a neighbouring hamlet. I watched with disbelief a kilometre-long human chain on both sides of the road, consisting of people mainly from the Muslim community of humble origins, awaiting his arrival. Many in the human chain had tears in their eyes. I enquired with some parents as to why they felt such strong emotion towards the retiring headmaster on the occasion of his farewell. I came to know that the retiring headmaster during his years of service used to enter the village from one end beckoning to children from every house to come to school. At the end of the day he would exit from the other end to inform the guardians of those children who did not attend school that day. This would happen regularly. This is what led to the intimate relationship he had established with the men and women of the village. I was convinced that Ashish babu has been a 100% success in his working life (*ibid*).

It is certainly the case that many interactions also take place between parents and teachers in private schools; but, there is a "private good" quality to such exchanges. Also, a private school is largely an enclosed domain in which parents – mostly from middle- and upper-middle-class backgrounds – execute an individual choice that is also often a class resource and a class strategy, which solidifies class divisions and class boundaries. In contrast, government schools deal with an amorphous, flowing and adaptable community, and strive to educate the children of that larger community in a classless fashion.

### **Collaboration with Teachers' Unions**

There are also examples of collaboration with several teachers' unions in the state that have, for instance, taken the form of joint organisation of workshops, fostering

of professional exchanges among teachers regarding pedagogic practices and curricular issues, dissemination of RTE guidelines among schools, and planning on the school meal programme. Teachers' unions seem to have played a positive role in at least three areas: enhancing enrolment and attendance of pupils, ensuring teachers' regularity, and improving the running of the Mid-Day Meal (MDM) scheme (Sarkar and Rana 2010). The active support of a number of unions has made the MDM a comparatively effective government programme in the state, its many shortcomings notwithstanding. When the government was struggling to introduce this programme in Kolkata, one of the unions took the initiative to break the ice. Of course, dialogue with the unions is bound to be dialectical, generating heat, differences of views and competing/conflicting claims vis-à-vis the priorities in school improvement; yet, such engagement does also shed light on how best to organise collective thought and action for improving public education.

Finally, research has to engage with the public at large to generate and influence a collective understanding of "good" education, of the failings of public education, and of how educational institutions can be designed better. This is, of course, a political question (Dreze and Sen 1995). This is so because the socio-political and policy environment in which teaching-learning takes place in school are as important as goals and strategies of individual families in affecting how much students learn and whether in an equitable manner (Carnoy 2004). And hence our insistence on the political significance of debate to both develop a greater understanding of educational aims and generate democratic pressures for their social realisation.

Efforts at deepening public engagement must, of course, strive to go beyond taking on the standard task of one-way advocacy from a self-proclaimed pedestal. Rather, our aim should be, to echo Nussbaum and Miller (2002), "to argue with people as equals". In a recently organised reading festival, a girl child did take part as an equal and raised a deep question about gender equality

without fear or hesitation: "What would you like to become?", we asked. "I wish to become a boy", she replied. "Why?" "Because then I can urinate wherever I wish" (Pratichi Institute 2012c). It is a sharp comment on a widespread public nuisance, but also the reflection of a perceptive and observant child on pervasive gender inequality in our society. An "ordinary" student of an "ordinary" government school has shown such power of imagination. It is the burden of the public school system to cater to her potential and needs.

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