

Elementary Education in West Bengal: Current Status and Issues

Tarak Nath Bhunia

Assistant Professor, Y.S. Palpara Mahavidyalaya (B.Ed. Dept.), West Bengal, India

Abstract

Education is a vital means for the potentialities of a human being to emerge in a positive direction so that a man can live in society with full of dignity and can mould the habits, tastes and character of individuals living in society by imparting knowledge and information. Therefore, in a democratic country like ours the government has felt the needs and importance of education and has an onerous responsibility to implement plans and programmes for democratization of education in the country. Now, education is constitutionally recognized as a birth right of the citizens of the country. So, to make education accessible to all has been a mission of the government and many targets like the Millennium Development Goal by 2015, India Vision by 2020, have been identified including that of Inclusive Growth by the government. It is appropriate for us now to assess and evaluate the progress and the prospect of the approaches which are being implemented for ensuring the universalization of elementary education in India.

Keywords: Elementary, society, democratic country

Introduction

Any person in modern society requires knowledge and skill to participate in various social processes in the public domain and being associated with gainful economic activities. In primitive society the knowledge was based on experiencing natural events and survival of human depended on learning related to gathering food and meeting other essential needs, which was quite little. There was also little inequality in the society caused by difference in knowledge of different individuals because education was not so linked with the means of livelihood. The present knowledge base of the society has been built over thousands of years and has grown tremendously in last few centuries. In keeping with that, system of education has been evolved for developing knowledge and related skill from childhood. Functionality and wellbeing of any person now largely depends on utilizing available knowledge and skill learnt through such education system. Also, for leading a meaningful life everyone has to relate him or her with others in the society and to realize their cultural values and social identity. All those are enabled by appropriate formal education in addition to the process of socialization within the family and the community. Even few centuries ago the difference of quality of life between a well-educated person and one not so educated was not so large and social status as well as economic entitlement of any individual depended more on heredity and much less on what an individual acquire through education. The modern society is becoming more knowledge based and ability to acquire knowledge and skill also decides the opportunity the individual gets to have his or her economic entitlement. The education system is to equip every citizen to acquire essential knowledge and skill for building capabilities for their functioning in the society and everyone has to acquire certain minimum level of education for being able to realize his or her potential in living a meaningful life. Swami Vivekananda said, "Education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man". Thus education develops a person from inside. Apart from intrinsic value of education as an individual asset for

fulfilling one's life, the functionality developed through education is very important from the point of view of receiving gainful employment including self-employment. Further, economic entitlement of the individual is strongly related to the level of education in terms of number of years of schooling and education beyond that. Social status of an individual as well as achievement in various social spheres also depends on the level of education. Similarly, the economic and social development of a country will largely depend on the level of education of the citizen of the country. Also, while there will remain substantial difference in social and economic status of the family in which one is born but a sound education system can ensure equity in the way two individuals born in two widely different families in terms of wealth can acquire equal level of education so that they have more equality in what they acquire in their life time. To state the same in a different way, failure to acquire education at par with members of the society from richer section enhances inequality in the society. Because of that reason, level of education in a society not only decides the level of social and economic development but also has much impact in bringing more equality in the society.

Normally, elementary education begins with the initiation of a child into a formal school. In other words, the beginning for formal education is called the elementary education. It refers to the first form of five years of schooling. In most states it includes class I-V covering children in the age group of 5-10 years. Elementary education covers the primary (6-11 years) and upper primary (11-14 years) age groups. In most Indian states, this translates into the successful completion of prescribes educational requirement till class VII. The essence of goal is for every 14 year old to have acquired foundation skills such as the ability to read and write with fluency, numeracy, comprehension, analysis, reasoning and social skills such as team work. Equally, elementary education should instill in children. Courage, curiosity, independence, resourcefulness, resilience, patience and understanding. While this is recognized by Indian policy documents in practice, the

formal elementary education system is always accused of not developing this skills in children.

Decentralisation of Elementary Education & Roll of Local Governments

Decentralised planning and management of elementary education is a goal set by the National Policy on Education, 1986. The Policy visualised direct community involvement in the form of Village Education Committees (VECs) for management of elementary education, with which the Panchayat members are associated. The Plan of Action of 1992, emphasised micro-planning as a process of designing a family-wise and child-wise plan of action by which every child regularly attends school or Non Formal Education (NFE) centre, continues his or her education at the place suitable to him/her and completes at least eight years of schooling or its equivalent at the NFE centre. States were expected to evolve institutional arrangements both in rural and urban areas for undertaking these activities. Those bodies were to be delegated with responsibilities with regard to location and relocation of existing primary and upper primary schools on the basis of micro planning and school mapping. In this regard, decentralisation of school management to grassroots level bodies is an important policy initiative. The 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments provide for decentralisation of the activities and facilitate transfer of power and participation of the local self-government institutions such as the Panchayats and the Municipalities. The Panchayats and Municipalities are supposed to play a more dynamic and proactive role through devolution of appropriate functions related to elementary education, as envisaged in the 11th Schedule of the Constitution. However, actual devolution varied widely across states and there has been very limited devolution in West Bengal. The PRIs have been given only some facilitating role without making them responsible for owning some of the activities related to the regular elementary education system and they are responsible only for the alternative elementary education system through the ShishuSikshaKarmasuchi (described later).

Objectives of the study

Keeping this picture in mind an attempt has been made:

- To study the relevance of education
- To analyse the growth and applications of various approaches in ensuring the universalization of elementary education
- And finally, to examine or assess the progress and the various hurdles being faced in making universalization of elementary education in India.

Methodology or Data Source

The paper is solely based on secondary information collected from different sources like books, journal articles, reports of various government organization and commission, articles published in national and local newspapers etc.

2. Various Approaches for Universalisation of Elementary Education

From the above discussion we have come to know about the constitutional provisions in “Article 45” and ‘Article 21 A’ and the subsequent legislative provisions made in India for expansion and improvement of elementary education in order

to make education accessible to all, various approaches and schemes have been implemented by the Government. Let us discuss the measures adopted by the Government of India to provide free and compulsory education for all children up to the age of 14 years.

2.1 National Policy on Education In 1968

The Education Commission (1964 – 66) had recommended that the Government of India should issue a statement on the National Policy of education which should provide guidance to the State Governments and local authorities in preparing and implementing educational plans. Accordingly, the Government of India issued a Resolution on National Policy on Education in 1968. The NPE (1968) observes that “Strenuous efforts should be made for the early fulfilment of the Directive Principle under Article 45 of the Constitution seeking to provide free and compulsory education for all children up to the age of 14. Suitable programmes should be developed to reduce the prevailing wastage and stagnation in schools and to ensure that every child who is enrolled in schools successfully completes the prescribed course”

2.2 District Primary Education Programme (DPEP)

The DPEP was launched in November, 1994 with the aim of operationalizing the strategies for achieving universalization of elementary education (UEE) through district specific planning and initiative. 85% of funding was from GOI (received from external assistance and passed as grants to states) and rest was the share of the state governments. It took a holistic view of primary education with emphasis on decentralised management, community mobilisation and district specific planning based on contextually and research based inputs. The basic objectives of DPEP were:

- To provide all children with access to primary education either in the formal system or through the NFE programme.
- To reduce differences in enrolment, dropout rates and learning achievement among gender and social groups to less than 5%.
- To reduce overall primary dropout rates for all students to less than 10%.
- To raise average achievement levels by at least 25% over measured base line levels and ensuring achievements of basic literacy and numeric competencies and a minimum of 40% achievement levels in other competencies by all primary school children.

The first phase of the programme was launched in 42 districts in the states of Assam, Haryana, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Tamilnadu and Madhya Pradesh. In the second phase, the programme has been launched in 80 districts of Orissa, Himachal Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat and in Phase I States. DPEP had been able to set up project management structures at district, state and national levels, create the environment and capacity for micro planning, take up the challenge of pedagogical innovation, create a responsive institutional base which includes both government and nongovernment institutions, enhance community participation and strengthen the process of catering to special focus groups such as tribal, scheduled castes, women and other marginalised sections.

2.3 Universalization of Elementary Education & Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan

The National Policy of Education 1986, as revised in 1992, had indicated three thrust areas in elementary education: i. Universal access for enrolment; ii. Universal retention of children up to 14 years of age; and iii. A substantial improvement in the quality of education to enable all children to achieve essential levels of learning. These objectives were addressed during the Tenth Plan period mainly through the SarvaShikshaAbhiyan (SSA), which continues to be the flagship programme of the country being implemented by the GOI in partnership with States and UTs. The Mid Day Meal and Teacher Education Schemes have also contributed towards progress in the above objectives. The 86th Constitutional Amendment Act 2002 made education a Fundamental Right for children in the age group of 6-14 years by providing that “the State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of six to fourteen years in such manner as the State may, by law, determine”. Some of the major achievements in the quest for universalization of elementary education are listed below: a) Reduction in the number of out of school children: From about 320 lakh in 2002-03, the number of out of school children had reduced to 70.5 lakh based on reports of States and UTs in March 2006. b) Decline in gender and social gaps: The gender gap at the primary stage reduced from 5.5 percentage points in 2002-03 to 4.2 percentage points in 2005-06. At the upper primary stage this gap reduced from 10.7 percentage points to 8.8 percentage points. The Gender Parity Index (GPI) at the primary stage in 2005 was 0.95 and 0.88 for the upper primary stage. The share of SC students in total enrolment was 20.72% at the primary stage and 19.42% at the upper primary stage. For ST students, share in total enrolment was 11.75% at the primary stage in 2005-06 and 9.28% at the upper primary stage. c) Reduction in dropout rates: The gross dropout rate, reflected in the Selected Education Statistics of MHRD declined from 39.03% in 2001-02 to 28.49% in 2004-05. For girls, the decline in dropout rate has been significant. During this period it decline from 39.88% to 24.82% - a decline of more than 15 percentage points. The dropout rate for the entire elementary stage is however declining less rapidly.

2.4 Right to Education Act, 2009 and Rights-based Framework for SSA To make elementary education compulsory the 86th Amendment of the Constitution in the year 2002 made provision of the Article 21-A, which states that “The State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of six to fourteen years in such manner as the State may, by law, determine and its consequential legislation”. The same has come in to force with introduction of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009 throughout India with effect from 1st April, 2010. The salient features of the RTE Act are mentioned below:-

1. The right of children to free and compulsory education till completion of elementary education in a neighbourhood school.
2. ‘Compulsory education’ makes it obligatory on the government to provide free elementary education and ensure compulsory admission, attendance and completion of elementary education to every child in the 6-14 age group. In order to make elementary education “free”, no child shall be liable to pay any kind of fee or charges or

expenses which would prevent him or her from pursuing and completing elementary education.

3. The RTE Act mandates that eventually elementary education must be provided by formal and recognised schools. All existing EGS centres (Sishu Siksha Kendra (SSK) and Madhyamaik Siksha Kendra (MSK in West Bengal) should be converted to regular schools or closed down when children are mainstreamed into neighbourhood schools.
4. It provides for a child not enrolled, whether never enrolled or a drop out, to be admitted to an age appropriate class in a formal school.
5. It specifies the duties and responsibilities of the appropriate Government, local authority and parents in providing free and compulsory education, and sharing of financial and other responsibilities between the Central and State Government.
6. It lays down the norms and standards relating to Pupil Teacher Ratio (PTRs), buildings and infrastructure, school-working days, teacher-working hours etc.
7. It provides for rational deployment of teachers by ensuring that the specified pupil teacher ratio is maintained for each school ensuring that there is no urban – rural imbalance in teacher postings. It also prohibits the deployment of teachers for work not related to education, other than the decennial census, elections and disaster relief. Also school teachers should not be involved in private tuition.
8. It provides that teachers will be appointed only with the requisite professional training and academic qualifications. RTE (section 26) requires that vacancy of teachers in a government school or government-aided school should not exceed 10% of the total sanctioned strength.
9. Every unaided school, imparting elementary education, is to be registered with the appropriate authority (e.g., District Inspector’s Office) within a given timeframe. Unaided schools are required to reserve 25% of the seats for children belonging to weaker sections and disadvantaged groups in the neighbourhood. The State RTE Rules should specify the limits of neighbourhood unambiguously for primary and upper primary schools.
10. The primary responsibility of monitoring the quality of education in a school rests with the School Management Committee (SMC). Hence, all other school-level committees (e.g., PTA, MTA) are to be closed.
11. xi. It prohibits (a) physical punishment and mental harassment of children, (b) screening during admissions, (c) payment of capitation fees, (d) prohibition of private tuition by teachers, and (e) bars the running of schools without recognition from the government.
12. It provides for development of curriculum which would ensure the all round development of a child building on the child’s knowledge, potential and talent and make the child free of fear, trauma and anxiety through a system which is child friendly and promotes child-centered learning in consonance with the values enshrined in the Constitution.

2.5 Enrolment and Retention in School

Since independence, there has been a substantial increase in enrolment at all levels of education, fivefold from 19.2 million

to 110.9 million in 1998- 99 at the primary stage; 3.1 million to 40.4 million in the upper primary stage. The gross enrolment ratios of children in the age group 6-11 increased from 42.6 percent in 1950-51 to 92.14 percent in 1998-99.

Likewise, the gross enrolment of 11-14 years age group increased from 12.7 percent in 1950- 51 to 57.58 percent in 1998-99

Table 1: Enrolment Status of Primary Schools

Sl. No.	District	No of Schools	5+ to 8+ Population (Projected)	Total Enrolment	(Overall)Net	Enrolment Out of School Children (5+to8+)NER	(Overall)
1	Bankura	3531	289934	360982	288733	1201	99.59
2	Birbhum	2387	273649	346291	270369	3280	98.80
3	Burdwan	4028	628560	778088	624651	3909	99.38
4	Coochbehar	2029	225118	321735	222706	2412	98.38
5	D/Dinajpur	1207	136495	186631	135963	532	99.61
6	U/Dinajpur	1457	221806	327993	208329	13477	93.92
7	Darjeeling	789	97468	119679	94655	2813	97.11
8	Hooghly	3130	457820	571961	456221	1599	99.65
9	Howrah	2155	388236	485851	386568	1668	99.57
10	Jalpaiguri	2224	309135	466625	307579	1556	99.50
11	Kolkata	1598	416080	479076	413302	2778	99.33
12	Malda	1902	298866	432763	294893	3973	98.67
13	Murshidabad	3191	532639	738733	523691	8948	98.32
14	E/Midnapore	3257	403773	574417	403383	390	99.90
15	W/Midnapore	4690	471751	609046	467370	4381	99.07
16	Nadia	2702	418188	528351	417988	200	99.95
17	N/24 Pgs	3626	811196	942713	807699	3497	99.57
18	S/24 Pgs	3751	627590	830985	621016	6574	98.95
19	Purulia	2995	230291	307939	217983	12308	94.66
20	Siliguri	510	88516	127102	87463	1053	98.81
	State		7327110	9536960	7250561	76549	98.96

Source: SarvaShikshaAbhiyan as on 01.04.2011

Table 2: Primary Education: Trends Enrolment

Indicators	2010-11	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16
GER	136.9	118.7	104.0	102.3	103.7
NER	93.2	92.09	96.96	94.02	
Average Dropout Retention rate:rate	6.5	6.6	6.3	2.9	1.5
Primary level	68.50	75.0	60.8	62.7	65.2

Source: www.DISE.in

Providing mere access to schools does not ensure enrolment of all the children of the school going age. There are several problems on the supply side as well as on the demand side. The 42nd round of National Sample Survey ascertained the reasons behind nonparticipation in the available schooling system. Out of all the non-enrolled children in school 10% mentioned the reason as want of facilities, 46% mentioned of various economic reasons including household chores and another 29.5% mentioned that they were not interested in education. Out of those who discontinued 30.83% did so because of economic reasons, 16.3% did so because of their failure and they were rather pushed out of the system rather than they dropping out. Another 26% dropped out because of lack of interest implying that a large number of children do not find the schooling interesting either due to supply side or demand side constraint. In terms of access to schools there has been a marked improvement in the primary level after introduction of the ShishuShikshaKarmasuchi. However, the problem continues for the secondary level education. The two major challenge remains as to how to make the education outcome meaningful to those who are not interested in schooling and how to reduce the economic pressure in not opting to join and continue in schools forgoing whatever little income they can earn for the family as child labour. In fact the

return from schooling has to exceed the opportunity cost of schooling.

2.6 Child Labour and Universalization of Elementary Education

One major category of children who are out of school is those who are child labour. The concept of labour in this context refers to labour associated with production and services which interfere with normative development of children including denial of opportunities for a desirable minimum education. India is one of the countries with high incidence of child labour which adversely affects universalization of elementary education. They are either never enrolled or drop out students who work on family farms, look after cattle, and their younger siblings; they cook, clean, wash, work in tea stalls and restaurants, and as domestic servants, beggars, and rag-pickers and also live in urban areas as street children. In 1979, the International Year of the Child, GOI appointed a commission to inquire into the state of India’s children and to make recommendations for their improved well-being. The commission was unequivocal in its support for both universal primary education and for bringing an end to child labour. In spite of that official figure on child labour remains indicative of failure to deal with the problem. One of the reasons behind

such failure is the strongly hierarchical society, which makes many to believe on continuation of such system resulting in lack of sincerity to remove one of the fundamental reason for continuing disparity in the society. It is argued in the Indian society that we ought not to intervene in all kinds of child labour since poor parents need the income of their children and the abolition of child labour and compulsory education must await a significant improvement in the wellbeing of the poor. As employment and income increase, so the argument goes, it will no longer be necessary for the poor to send their children to work and all such children will join the education system. Such argument is not supported by historical experiences and poverty is not the only reason for existence of child labour. There are many more social and economic factors which forces the children to work as child labour. Incidence of child labour is confined to mostly families who are not only poor but are from lower social categories. It is estimated that there were around 14.5 million working children below 14 years in India, as on March 1991, which account for 5.5% of the total child population. However, there is debate on the estimate and the actual incidence could be little higher. West Bengal has marginally lower incidence of child labour.

3. Service Provision for Promoting the Elementary Education

To promote the Elementary Education different steps are follows. Such as:

i. Enhance Literacy rate among the Different Social Groups and the Gender Gap.

There is also persistence gender gap in literacy. The literacy rates of male and female in West Bengal during the last three census held in 1991, 2001 and 2011 are 1981 male 59.93%, female 36.07%; 1991 male 67.81%, female 46.56%; 2001 male 77.02%, female 59.61%; 2011 male 82.67%, female 71.16 % respectively. The gender gap in literacy also varies across social classes. As per 2001 census literacy rate of SC male and female were 70.54% were 46.90% respectively. Corresponding figures for the ST were 57.38% and 43.40 % respectively.

ii. The Supply Side Constraints in UEE.

There are several supply side constraints which need to be improved for attaining UEE. The problem is more for those located in remote areas and belonging to the backward communities. Access to school, particularly at the upper primary level, availability of teachers and physical infrastructure are still serious problems in the educationally backward areas.

iii. Raising Demand for Literacy and the Literacy Campaign.

The National Literacy Mission (NLM) was established for promotion of adult education in a mission mode. The focus was for those in the age group 15-35 years. The most important contribution of the literacy movement has been the improvement of parental priority in educating their children.

iv. To promote the Mid-Day Meal Programme.

National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education is a centrally sponsored scheme launched on 15th

August, 1995 to boost universalization of primary education by increasing retention of enrolment, improve attendance and simultaneously it has an impact on nutrition of student in Primary School. The programme originally covered children in primary stage (Class-I to V) in Government, Local Body and Government-aided schools.

During the year 2009 the following changes have been made to improve the implementation of the scheme:-

- a. Food norms have been revised to ensure balanced and nutritious diet to children of upper primary group by increasing the quantity of pulses from 25 to 30 grams, vegetables from 65 to 75 grams and by decreasing the quantity of oil and fat from 10 grams to 7.5 grams.
- b. Cooking cost (excluding the labour and administrative charges) has been revised from Rs.1.68 to Rs. 2.50 for primary and from Rs. 2.20 to Rs. 3.75 for upper primary children from 1.12.2009 to facilitate serving meal to eligible children in prescribed quantity and of good quality. The cooking cost for primary is Rs. 2.69 per child per day and Rs. 4.03 for upper primary children from 1.4.2010. The cooking cost will be revised by 7.5% from 1.4.2011.
- c. The honorarium for cooks and helpers was paid from the labour and other administrative charges of Rs.0.40 per child per day provided under the cooking cost. In many cases the honorarium was so little that it became very difficult to engage manpower for cooking the meal. A Separate component for Payment of honorarium @ Rs.1000 per month per cook- cum-helper was introduced from 1.12.2009. Honorarium at the above prescribed rate is being paid to cook-cum-helper. Following norms for engagement of cook-cum-helper have been made:
 1. One cook- cum-helper for schools up to 25 students
 2. Two cooks-cum-helpers for schools with 26 to 100 students
 3. One additional cook-cum-helper for every addition of up to 100 students.
 4. The GOI passed "The Right of Children to free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009" on 26/8/2009 which came into effect on 1/4/2010. The act aims towards achieving universal elementary education for the children of 6 – 14 years age group upto class VIII.
 5. Facilities Available for Elementary Education from other Department.
 6. Apart from schools run by the School Education Department there are other institutions providing formal education at primary and upper primary levels. Those are the SishuSiksha Kendra (SSK) and MadhyamikShiksha Kendra (MSK) run by the Panchayat & RD Department; Madrasas run by THE MINORITY AFFAIRS AND MADRASA EDUCATION DEPARTMENT AND SPECIAL SCHOOLS FOR CHILD LABOUR BY THE LABOUR DEPARTMENT. At the end of 2007-08 the State had 49,986 Primary schools, 1283 Junior High schools and 3,954 High schools. There were also 16,054 SSKs, 1067 SSPs, 352 NGO run EGS centres, 2,146 Bridge Course centres, 1752 MSKs and 1,489 Open Schools (RabindraMuktoVidyalay).
 7. Functioning of the SSKs. Though the programme was launched in 1997-98 but it took off really in the next year at the end of which there were only 1,789 SSKs. The number increased rapidly

over the years and as per report compiled through DISE - 2008-09, there are 16,109 SSKs. Total number of students during the year 2010-11 in the SSKs was 14,24680 and where the No. of SSKs and No. of Sahayika/Sahayak are 16100 and 46653 respectively.

Conclusion

Thus it is a right time for the government to take the action for removing these barriers in order to achieve the democratization of education. Besides we are heading towards the target year of Millennium Development Goals, where accessibility of education to all is a major concern. But thing is that the education must cater the needs of the learners that can produce the functional literate and enhance the life skills of the learners. The government is responsible for providing education to every child up to the eight standards, free of cost, irrespective of class and gender. It has paved the way for building a strong, literate and empowered youth of this country.

References

1. Afridi F. Midday Meals in Two States, Economic and Political Weekly. 2005, 40(15).
2. Choudhury A. Revisiting Dropouts, Old Issues, Fresh Perspective Economic and Political Weekly. 2006, 41(51).
3. Colcough C. The impact of Primary School on Economic Development, A review of Evidence", World Development. 1982; 10(3):85-94.
4. Das A. How Far have we come in Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Economic and Political Weekly, 2007, 42(1).
5. Mehrotra, Santoshetal. Universalising Elementary Education in India: Uncaging the 'Tiger' Economy, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2005.
6. Majumdar, Manabi. Exclusion in Education: Indian States in Comparative Perspective, in Barbara Harriss-White and S.Subramanian (Eds), Illfare in India, Sage Publications. New Delhi, 1999.
7. Mehrotra, Santosh. Reforming Public Spending in Education and Mobilising Resources, Lessons from International Experience, Economic and Political Weekly, 2004.
8. Rani P Geetha. Challenges of Achieving and Financing Universal Elementary Education in India, the Case of SSA, Journal of Educational Planning and Administration, 2006, 20(4).
9. Ramachandran, Vimala. Getting Children Bac to School, Case Studies in Primary Education, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2003.
10. Singh BS. Future of Midday Meal, Economic and Political Weekly, 2004.
11. Singh, Raman P. Elementary Education and Literacy in India, Yojana, 2007, 51.
12. Singh, Gurmeet. Progress of Human Development in the Changing Scenario, Kurukshetra, A Journal of Rural Development, 2010, 58(11).
13. <http://www.dise.in>