

SCHOOLS IN TRANSITION: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE
IN WEST BENGAL'S EDUCATION POLICY AND PROCESSES

CENTRE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

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RESEARCH INTERN

CONTENTS	PAGE NO.
1. Structure and Outline of the Paper.....	3
2. Education in West Bengal: An Introduction.....	5
3. School Education in West Bengal: Laws and Legislations.....	7
4. Key Players: Institutional Structure and Administrative Organization	
Department of Education.....	8
SCERT.....	9
Boards of Education.....	9
District Institutes of Education and Training.....	12
Primary Teachers Training Institute.....	13
ABTA.....	14
Other players.....	14
5. Schools and Financial management in West Bengal	
Budget formulation and flow of command.....	15
Typology of schools and financial management.....	17
6. Curriculum	
Primary Education.....	18
Secondary and Higher Secondary Education.....	19
7. Examinations	
Structure and Content.....	23
Parity.....	24
Equity and effectiveness.....	26
8. Textbooks	
Publication and distribution.....	31
Content.....	32
Quality.....	33
Review and feedback system.....	34
9. Madrasah Education in West Bengal	
Background and Structure.....	35
Curriculum and Examinations.....	35
General and Financial Administration.....	36
Conclusion.....	37
10. Open schooling in West Bengal	
Background.....	39
Rationale.....	39
Target Groups.....	40
Structure and Functions.....	40
Curriculum.....	41
Textbooks.....	41
Examinations.....	41
RMV and Vocational Education.....	42
Challenges.....	43
11. Summing up.....	44

Structure and outline of the paper

The paper begins with an introduction to school education in West Bengal. The legal premises on which the edifices of school education in Bengal have been structured are then laid out. This is followed by a detailed mapping of the institutional structures and administrative organization of bodies that play a key role in education policy. These bodies include the Department of Education, the SCERT, and the Boards of Education (with stress on the West Bengal Boards and Council), ABTA, DIET's and PTTI's.

After discussing the key players and their process of interaction for the formulation and implementation of education policy, the paper moves on to trace the dialectics of school education through the nodal points of Curriculum, Examinations and Textbooks.

With regard to curriculum, the stress is on schools affiliated to the West Bengal Board of Primary Education, West Bengal Board of Secondary Education and West Bengal Council of Higher Secondary Education., with special reference to significant similarities as well as differences between these and the centrally managed Boards i.e. CBSE and ICSE. The recent changes in Madhyamik and HS curricula have been laid out.

With regard to examinations, the paper focuses more on Madhyamik and HS examinations, since all other examinations are internally conducted by the respective schools. The recent changes in examination patterns and related debates have been explored. The efficacy of examination patterns have been assessed with reference to parameters such as parity, equity and effectiveness, as judged by the performance of government and government-aided versus private unaided schools, as well as variations within government schools. The latter category has again been studied under rural-urban inequities, income class inequities and gender inequities.

Under textbooks, important issues related to publication and distribution, content, quality and review and feedback systems have been dealt with. Other relevant areas have been addressed in the light of past performances and recent developments.

The next section deals with open schooling. The paper treats this as a separate section as open schooling conducted through the Rabindra Mukta Vidyalaya has its own primary, secondary and higher secondary stages, with its own structures for curriculum, examinations and textbooks. The performance of the state's open schooling system is analyzed against a backdrop of institutional mechanisms as well as recommendations of committees and commissions. The issue of Vocational education is then scrutinized. This is followed by suggestions to upgrade the RMV.

A discussion on Madrasah education in West Bengal follows. This is treated as a separate section not only because, as in the case of open schooling, Madrasah education has its own stages with their own curriculum, examinations and textbooks, but also because Madrasah education has been a subject of great controversy in recent times.

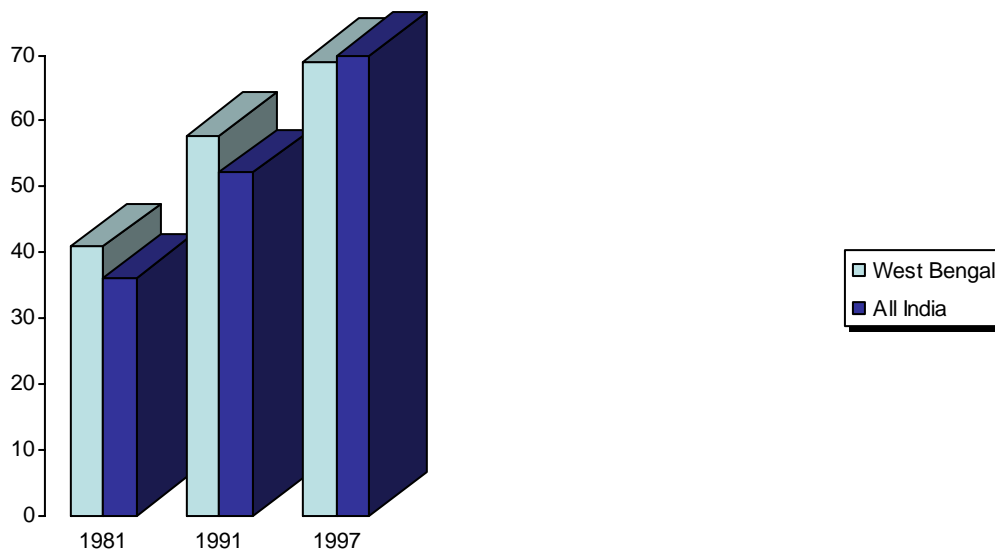
The paper concludes by providing a comprehensive overview of the school education system in West Bengal. In summing up the current scenario, it argues for flexibility, innovation, accountability, competition and public choice.

The paper utilizes both primary and secondary sources of information, and uses graphs and charts to visually illustrate some of the key points. An attempt has been made to quantify, as far as possible, the theoretical claims that have been put forward.

Education in West Bengal: An Introduction

The State of West Bengal has had a distinct education policy since decades. However, from local bodies managing the education process in Calcutta in 1823 and the Calcutta University Commission entering into the debate on education policy in 1917¹, to centralizing measures undertaken in the post-independence era owing to the recommendations of the Kothari Commission (1964-66) and the Forty-second Amendment (1976) placing education on the Concurrent list, the Centre-State tussle over educational administration and management has seen numerous oscillations.

Bengal has stirred up controversies over its historically biased and allegedly irrelevant curriculum as well as its creation of parallel organizations to the Centre, such as the State Open Schools system. The dismal state of Government schools as reflected in poor teaching quality, inadequacy of infrastructure and consequent student apathy and high drop-out rates, especially as one moves away from Kolkata towards the far-flung districts, has been a blot on Bengal's landscape for decades. The language issue regarding the medium of instruction has been a raging debate both within as well as outside the state. The deteriorating performance of home students in All-India competitive engineering and medical entrance examinations has raised numerous question marks on the efficacy of the state's educational system. Yet, quite paradoxically, West Bengal's literacy levels have not been unfavourable in comparison with the national average, and have been distinctly favourable as compared to the performance of many other states such as Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan.



Source: Educational Administration in West Bengal: Structures, Processes and Future Prospects, Manju Narula and Srilekha Majumdar, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 2001.

¹ 'Overview of Indian CET Policy Formulation', Centre for Civil Society, New Delhi

Successive Committees and Commissions have been appointed by the State Government over the years, to review one or the other aspect of the state's School Education Policy. Realizing the lacunae in the schooling system, which actually retards the growth of generations of budding citizens by depriving them of essential knowledge and skills in an increasingly competitive world, many far-reaching changes have been advocated. The curriculum has been rehailed to make it more relevant. Examination systems have been upgraded in order to achieve some parity with Central Boards. The publication and distribution of textbooks is being streamlined in order to bring about more equity and accountability across Boards and their affiliated schools in the state. Many of these changes are very recent and some of them are yet to be implemented. Nevertheless, the winds of change are blowing. Finally.

If one were to view what seems like an all-pervasive transition in school education policy against the backdrop of ideological splits within the state's educational institutions themselves, such as the tug-of-war between the government education department and non-performing schools, the much publicized political outburst on Madrasah education, and the discord within the ranks of the ABTA over various issues, the situation begins to appear more complex. Add to this the recent reports such as those by the CAG, the HRD Ministry and NGO's like the Pratiche Trust indicting the Communist Government for its apparent failure to impart quality education to its children of school-going age, and the School Education Policy of the state increasingly becomes controversial territory.

The controversies provide fertile ground for any research in education that attempts to trace the dialectics of education for children as a theoretical ideal, as it plays itself out in institutional settings, amid real-world pragmatics and power play. This paper attempts to understand the rapid changes as well as the persistent continuities in school education policy and processes in West Bengal, in light of the recent transitions within the state and against the backdrop of a rapidly globalizing world.

School Education in West Bengal: Laws and legislations

Within the broad national Constitutional framework, there is a complex system of acts and codes to govern the educational process in West Bengal. Of these, some pertain specifically to School Education and provide the bedrock of school education policy in West Bengal, as well as the legal basis on which the structured the institutions that are involved in the processes and practice of education.

ACTS ON SCHOOL EDUCATION PASSED BY THE STATE LEGISLATURE

- The Bengal Rural Primary Education Act, 1930
- The West Bengal Urban Primary Education Act, 1963
- The West Bengal Board of Secondary Education Act, 1963
- The West Bengal Primary Education Act, 1973(implemented in 1990)
- The West Bengal Council of Higher Secondary Education Act, 1975
- The West Bengal Board of Madrasah Education Act, 1994, and
- Amendments to the above

Key Players: Institutional Structures and Administrative Organization

The mandate of the Centre, as revealed in the recommendations of the National Policy on Education, has a considerable impact on the state's education policy. Several Commissions, Committees and working groups have also paved the way in school education. Of these, the Education Commission constituted by the Government of West Bengal under the chairmanship of Dr. Ashok Mitra to examine all aspects of the state's education, and the one-man Commission constituted under the chairmanship of Dr. Pabitra Sarkar to make recommendations regarding the No-Detention Policy as well as the introduction of English in primary classes deserve special mention. Apart from these, the agents of civil society have also contributed to debates and discussions on education.

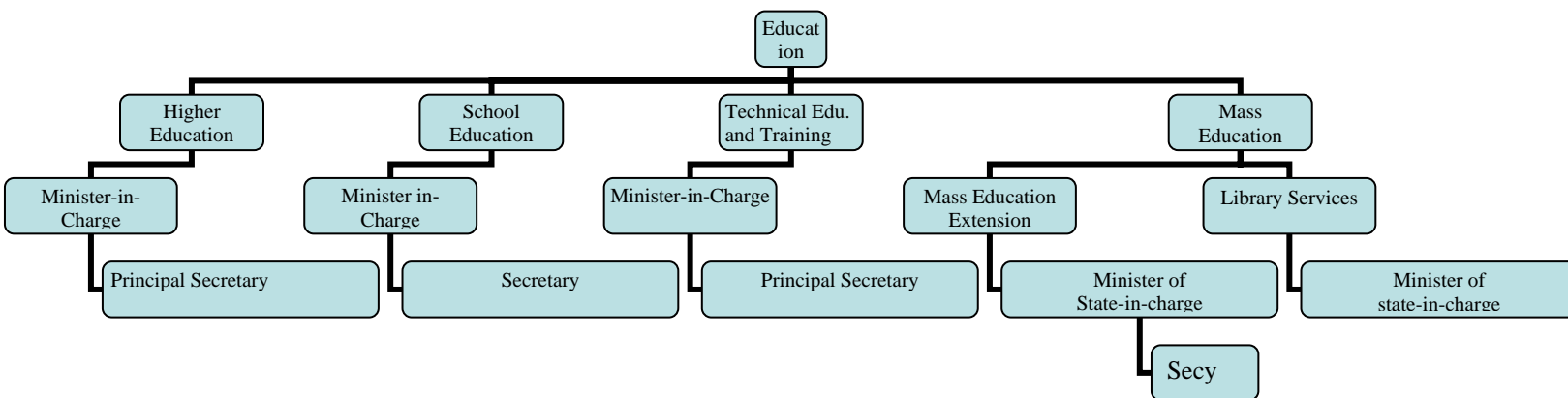
Some institutions nevertheless emerge as the key players in the dialectic of education policy formulation and implementation. These institutions are involved in the economics – and politics - of education, and are the agents responsible for translating the idealism that sees education as a liberating force, a power and a vision, into the realism that defines school education as it exists in practice.

(1) Education Department

West Bengal's Department of Education was created in January, 1921, under the Montague-Chelmsford Reform Act of 1919, to give effect to the principle of Diarchy in provincial administration². After independence, the Education Minister holds charge of the state's Education Department. After the Minister of Education, the highest functionary at the Secretariat level is the Secretary, assisted by the Special Secretary, Joint Secretary, Deputy Secretaries and Joint Secretaries.

The Department is divided into the Departments of Higher Education, School Education, Technical Education and Training, and Mass Education Extension Departments. Of these, the Department of School Education is the most pertinent for the purposes of this paper.

The Department of School Education oversees the work of the Directorate of School Education, Primary, Secondary, Higher Secondary, Madrasah, SCERT, and Directorate of Accounts. The main functions of the Department comprise of making policy decisions and framing rules regarding primary, upper primary, secondary and higher secondary education, Madrasah education as well as education for linguistic minorities and backward classes, and all other related establishment matter, including those pertaining to appointment, conditions of service, and vigilance.



ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, WEST BENGAL

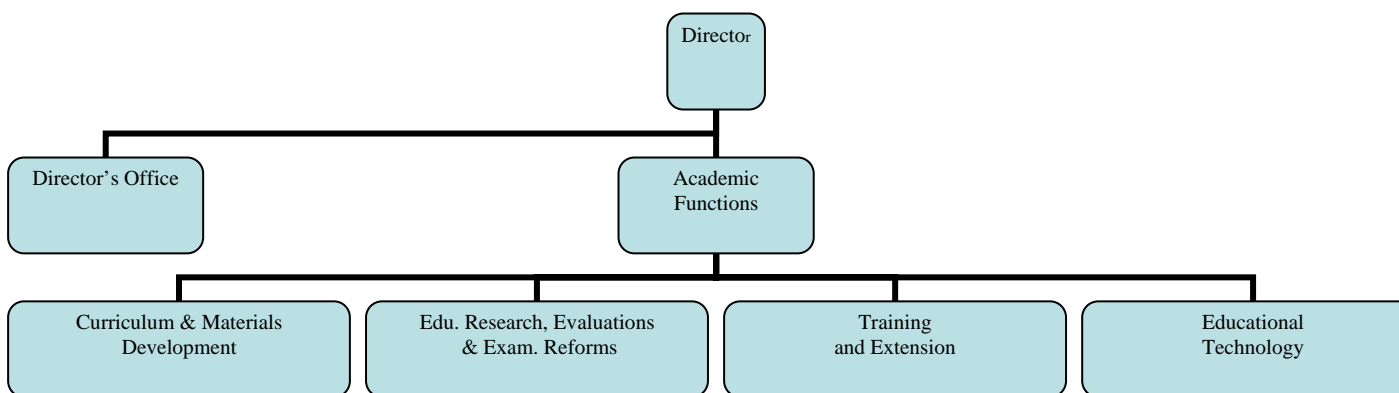
Source: Narula and Majumdar, 2001

² Educational Administration in West Bengal: Structures, Processes and Future Prospects, Manju Narula and Srilekha Majumdar, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 2001

(2) The State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT)

The SCERT, West Bengal, is the training and research wing of the Department of School Education. It was established in May 1980 by Government order No. 712 Education (CS).³ It evolved through the merger of 7 independent institutions working for the qualitative improvement of school education. The functions of the SCERT cover the entire spectrum of school education from planning to evaluation. Its work is carried out by 4 divisions.

- Division of Curriculum and Materials Development
- Division of Training and Extension
- Division of Educational Technology
- Division of Educational Research Evaluation and Examination Reform



ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE AND HIERARCHY OF THE SCERT

Source: Narula and Majumdar, 2001

(3) Boards of Education

- **Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE)**

The CBSE, which began as an autonomous society in 1935, is now one of the two premier national boards. The CBSE works closely with the NCERT, and follows the National Policy on Education framework very closely. In West Bengal, the Kendriya Vidyalayas (KV's) as well as many private schools follow the CBSE. The Board only grants affiliation to those schools that have obtained a No Objection Certificate (NOC) from the state government.⁴ The latter also has the power to issue temporary NOC's, and

³ Narula and Majumdar, 2001

⁴ www.cbse.nic.in

a withdrawal of NOC by the state government results in cancellation of the school's affiliation by the Board.

- **Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations (CISCE)**

The CISCE was formed in 1958 and is the only non-Governmental Secondary Education Board to be recognized by the Ministry of Education under the Delhi School Education Act of 1973. The Council is composed of representatives from Anglo-Indian Schools, other CISCE Board examining institutions and state institutions. Committees, including the Curricular Committee report their findings to the General Council for approval⁵.

West Bengal has the highest number of CISCE affiliated schools. Even though there are no regional offices, a branch office in Kolkata runs some teacher-training programmes.

- **West Bengal Board⁶**

In West Bengal, a large number of schools follow the West Bengal State Boards (and Council). These Boards have competence to oversee different stages – and categories, as in the case of the Madrasah Board – of school education.

(1) The West Bengal Board of Primary Education

This was constituted on the basis of the West Bengal Primary Education Act, 1973, which was enacted to provide for better development and management of primary education in order to make it universal, free and compulsory. The Act sought to repeal the Bengal (Rural) Primary Education Act, 1930, the Bengal (Urban) Primary Education Act, 1963 and the West Bengal (Rural) Primary Education (Temporary Provisions) Act, 1969. On the basis of this Act were also constituted the District Primary Schools Councils for every district as well as Calcutta Primary Schools Council for the district of Calcutta.

The West Bengal Board of Primary Education is an autonomous body corporate with perpetual succession and a common seal. It is entitled to acquire, hold and dispose of property, and enter into contracts for the purposes of the Act. It consists of 43 members. Of these, 2 are ex-officio – Director of School Education, and President of the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education (or his nominee). The other members are elected from primary teachers, teachers of Primary Teachers' Training Institutes, councillors of Calcutta Corporation, Commissioners of Municipalities, members of Zila Parishad and members of the Legislative Assembly.

The Board has the power to 'guide, supervise and control primary education'. This includes providing by regulations, on the basis of the recommendations of the curriculum committee, the syllabus, the textbooks to be studied in primary schools and

⁵ Overview of Indian CET Policy Formulation, Centre for Civil Society, New Delhi, 2005

⁶ Narula and Majumdar, 2001

for examinations conducted by the Primary Schools Councils. The Board also publishes, from time to time, a list of books approved for use in primary schools, and makes regulations on all aspects connected with examinations. Apart from this, it also administers the West Bengal Board of Primary Education Fund.

(2) The West Bengal Board of Secondary Education

This state splits its secondary Education Board into two separate organizations, administered under completely separate Acts. The first of these organizations is the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education administered by the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education Act, 1963. This Act sought to repeal the West Bengal Education Act 1950 and 1954.

The Board consists of

- (a) The President, appointed by the State Govt. for a maximum of 5 years
- (b) The President of the West Bengal Council of Higher Secondary Education, ex-officio
- (c) The Director of School Education, Govt. of West Bengal, ex-officio
- (d) The Director of Technical Education, Govt. of West Bengal, ex-officio
- (e) The Deputy Director of Secondary Education, West Bengal, ex-officio
- (f) Two persons elected from among the teaching staff of training colleges for teachers of recognized Secondary schools
- (g) The Deans of the Faculties of Arts and Sciences, ex-officio
- (h) The Dean of the Faculty of Engineering and Technology, Jadavpur University, ex-officio
- (i) The Adhyaksha, Kala Bhawan, Vishwa Bharti, Shantiniketan, ex-officio
- (j) A Dean nominated by each of the Universities of Burdwan, Kalyani and North Bengal, and the Bidhan Chandra Krishi Viswa Vidyalaya
- (k) One person nominated by the Madrasah Education Board
- (l) Two heads of recognized secondary schools nominated by the State Govt., as well as thirty-three permanent teachers of recognized secondary schools
- (m) Two representatives elected from the West Bengal Legislative Assembly
- (n) Five persons interested in education, nominated by the State Govt., at least one of whom shall be a woman
- (o) One person elected by the employees of the Board from among themselves
- (p) One permanent member of the teaching staff of primary District School Board or the schools recognized by the Director of Primary Education, nominated by the State Govt., as well as one permanent member of the teaching staff of colleges affiliated to any of the Universities in West Bengal, nominated by the State Govt.

It is the Board's duty to advise the State Govt. on all matters relating to secondary education referred to it by the Govt. The Board has the power to direct, supervise and control secondary education. This includes laying down the general policy for secondary

education, instituting the secondary as well as other examinations, and administering the West Bengal Secondary Education Fund.

The Board can also undertake the preparation, production and sale of textbooks.

(3) The West Bengal Council of Higher Secondary Education

This is the second organization to handle secondary education in the state. It is administered by the West Bengal Council of Higher Secondary Education Act, 1975. As compared to the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education, this Council is a corporate body that runs the state's higher secondary education system.

The Council consists of the following members:

- a. The President, appointed by the state Govt.
- b. The President of the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education
- c. The Director of Secondary Education, West Bengal
- d. The Director of Technical Education, West Bengal
- e. The Director of Industries, West Bengal
- f. The Director of Agriculture, West Bengal
- g. A maximum of eight persons nominated by the State Government, of whom one is a woman interested in education, one is the Principal of a college, and one is the Head of a recognized Higher Secondary School.
- h. Six teachers of Higher Secondary Schools
- i. One representative of the Senate of the University of Calcutta
- j. Two representatives of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly
- k. One representative each from the Universities of Burdwan, North Bengal, Jadavpur and Rabindra Bharti, elected from amongst themselves.

The function of the Council is to advise the State Govt. on all matters relating to Higher Secondary Education referred to it by the State Govt. Therefore, it has the power generally to direct, supervise and control higher secondary education. This includes granting or refusing recognition to institutions; providing by regulations, on the basis of the recommendations of the Syllabus Committee, the curriculum, the course of studies to be followed; and prescribing textbooks to be studied in recognized institutions for the secondary and other examinations instituted by the Council.

The Council also undertakes, with the approval of the State Govt., the preparation, publication and sale of text-books and other books for use in the recognized institutions.

(4) District Institutes of Education and Training (DIET's)

The quality of school education as well as the efficient and optimal use of available resources depends on the quality and professional competence of teachers. Teacher education and training therefore assumes an overarching importance in school education.

Just as NCERT and NIEPA function at the national level and SCERT functions at the state level, DIET's were conceived of to contribute to the development of teacher training and education at the district level. Its functions include imparting pre-service and in-service training to teachers, acting as a district resource unit to provide resource support such as extension, development of teaching aids and evaluation tools, engaging in curriculum and materials development, and undertaking educational planning and management at the grassroots level. Its special target groups include women, scheduled castes and tribes, as well as educationally disadvantaged children.

DIET's are answerable to the state government regarding the fulfillment of specified targets and objectives.

(5) Primary Teachers Training Institute

In West Bengal, teacher education has been undergoing an expansion since independence, as witnessed by the increase in the total number of teacher-education institutes from 59 in 1947 to 111 in 1997⁷. Of these, 55 were Primary Teachers Training Institutes (PTTI's). These were earlier called Junior Basic Training Institutes (JBTI's), and numbered 33 in 1967. In 1997, the 55 PTTI's had an intake capacity of about 5015 candidates per year. They offer a one year-certificate course for new as well as in-service primary teachers, in the ratio of 30:70 on the recommendation of the Ashok Mitra Commission.⁸

The academic control of the PTTI's lies with the School Education Directorate and the SCERT, while the District Inspector of Primary Education, headed by the District Inspector of Schools supervises them.

Similarly, the number of training colleges for secondary school teachers grew from 5 in 1947 to 47 in 1997. The academic control of these B.Ed colleges lies with the universities to which they are affiliated.

However, in spite of these training institutes, there are a large number of untrained teachers at both the primary as well as the secondary level. A study of NCTE reveals that 47% of total seats in PTTI's were lying unfilled in 1997!⁹ This undoubtedly calls for better management of these institutes and a scrutiny of their policies. The quality of the faculty, duration of course and curriculum also need to be comprehensively examined, and follow-up of pedagogical principals and transactional processes in actual classroom situations needs to be strengthened. The importance of "developing standard teaching materials and effective teaching methods, followed by extensive teacher orientation"¹⁰ was reiterated in a report of the School Education Committee.

⁷ Narula and Majumdar, 2001

⁸ Narula and Majumdar, 2001

⁹ Teacher Education in West Bengal, 1998, NCTE Document 98/17, Quoted in Narula and Majumdar, 2001

¹⁰ The Report of the School Education Committee, West Bengal, Submitted 31 December, 2002

(6) State Advisory Committees

The members of the State Advisory Committee include¹¹:

- a) Minister-in-charge of Education (Primary and Secondary)
- b) Minister of State (Primary and Madrasah Education)
- c) President, West Bengal Board of Primary Education
- d) Secretary, Department of School Education
- e) Director of School Education
- f) Director of SCERT
- g) Assistant Director of Primary Education (Textbook)
- h) General Secretary, all recognized Primary Teachers Associations
- i) General Secretary, all recognized Secondary Teachers Associations
- j) General Secretary, Paschim Banga Vidyalaya Paridarshak Samity

This committee acts a policy-framing body.

(7) Other Players

- **The All-Bengal Teachers Association (ABTA)** – This is the largest teachers' body in the State. Though all viewpoints are represented in the body, it is largely Communist party of India (CPIM) controlled.
- **Parents-Teachers associations** – Though these associations are functional, the extent of their involvement varies according to literacy levels, type of school and area.

These, then, are the key institutional players of West Bengal that interact in order to formulate the school education policy and processes of the state.

Key players: Institutional structures and administrative organization

- Department of Education
- SCERT
- Boards of Education – West Bengal State Boards and Council, Madrasah Board as well as centrally managed Boards
- District Institutes of Education and Training
- Primary Teachers Training Institute
- ABTA
- Other players such as parents associations, students unions, media, NGO's

¹¹ Narula and Majumdar, 2001

SCHOOLS AND FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT IN WEST BENGAL

Financial resources are undoubtedly the most crucial input in the management and development of school education. Infrastructure and facilities, teacher training and specialized teaching aids, and services to students all need money. Whatever may be the organizational and administrative hierarchy, the actual flow of power imitates the direction of money flow. The school education budgeting system therefore assumes a great importance.

Budget Formulation and flow of command

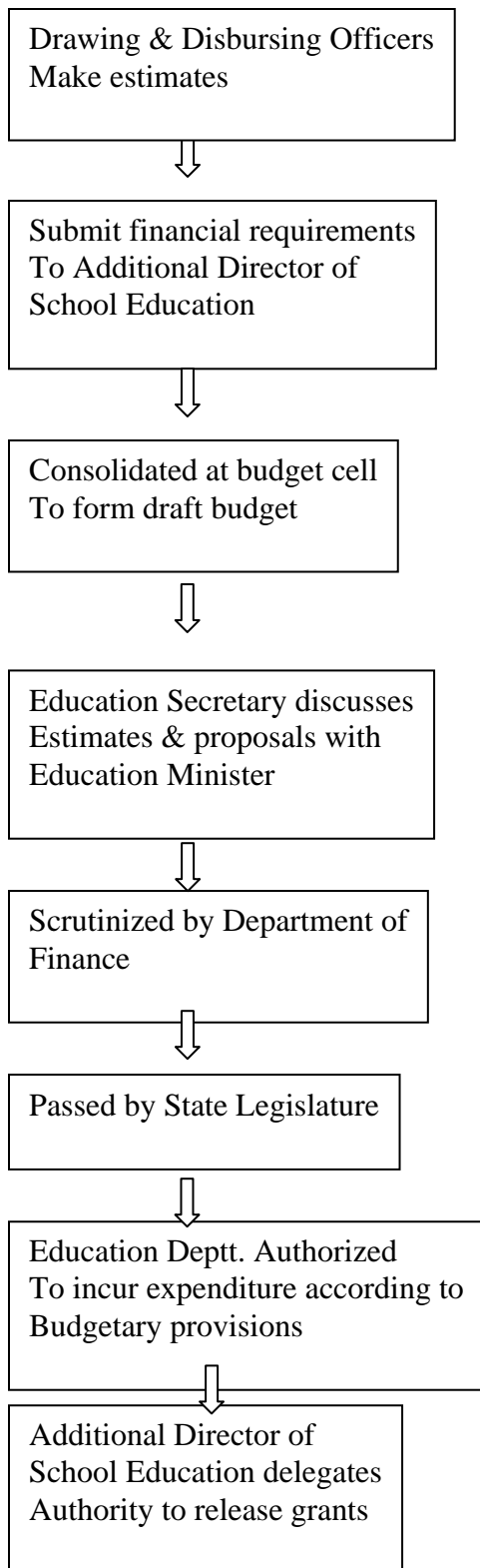
The Department of School Education has a separate budget branch. Estimates are made by the drawing and disbursing officers, who then submit their financial requirements for a given plan period to the Additional Director of School Education under plan and non-plan heads, together with a statement of the expenditure incurred during the preceding year. Plan expenditure refers to the expenditure incurred on new projects initiated during the current plan period or continued from the previous plan period. For instance, the salaries of teaching as well as other employees recruited against posts created during a plan period are drawn from the plan provisions. However, on the expiry of the plan period, these expenses become non-plan expenditure. In other words, the development schemes and projects initiated in a plan period are all transferred to non-plan expenditures at the end of the five-year plan period. These schemes would also include those sponsored by the Central Government, for which all or part of the State Government's expenditure is reimbursed by the centre on the basis of actuals.

The estimates submitted by all the officers of the Directorate are compiled and consolidated at the Budget Cell, after which they are sent to the Education Secretary. The Secretary discusses them with the Education Minister before sending them to the finance department. The budget estimates are then scrutinized by the Department of Finance for onward transmission to the State Legislature. After the legislature passes the budget, the Education Department is authorized by the Finance Department to incur expenditures within the budgetary provisions. On receiving the budget allotment, the Additional Director of School Education delegates the authority to release grants to district officers and heads of government schools.

The school education budget of the state is divided into two sectors – Primary and Secondary. The primary sector deals with all expenditure for maintenance and development of primary schools having class I-IV only, while the secondary sector deals with expenses incurred for maintenance and development of junior high schools, high schools, HS schools and Madrasahs.

In 1997-98, the total education budget was 2517.28 crore rupees, of which the plan and non-plan components were 196.22 and 2321.16 respectively. The education budget was 23.02% of the total state budget¹².

¹² Narula and Majumdar, 2001



BUDGET FORMULATION AND IMPLEMENTATION

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Typology of schools and Financial Management

Schools can be divided broadly into four types on the basis of their financial sources.

1) **Government schools:** These are schools are run by the Department of Education of the State Government.

2) **Government-aided schools:** These are schools which run under the grants-in-aid Scheme of the government. In West Bengal, most of the recognized non-governmental upper primary, secondary and HS schools and Madrasahs run under the government's grants-in-aid scheme. The recurring grants are provided to meet the salary component of the teaching as well as other staff. Grants-in-aid are routed to the teachers as well as non-teaching staff through the school and madrasah managements, which are then responsible for the actual disbursement of salary. The Director of school education allocates funds to the District Inspector, who releases funds to the district treasury, from where the funds are sent to the link bank and then the paying bank. The management collects the grants-in-aid from the paying bank.¹⁴

However, there are certain guidelines which need to be adhered to by the schools that are in receipt of government grants. These guidelines include a prescribed teacher-pupil ratio, minimum roll strength, and approved salary scales, to name a few.

3) **Private-aided schools:** These schools are under private management, and are not affiliated to the State Board. However, they receive grants from the government for certain specific purposes. For instance, in the year 1997-98, the total fund released to 177 schools affiliated to the CISCE or the CBSE was 20.53 crores. The 2,972 teachers and 2,038 non-teaching staff of these schools thus got government grants.

4) **Private unaided schools:** These schools are not affiliated to the State Board and do not receive any grant from the government. For instance, these schools could be run by a Society or Trust, constituted and registered under the provision of a central or a state act.

¹³ Narula and Majumdar, 2001

¹⁴ Narula and Majumdar, 2001

The paper now moves on to mapping the specifics of this interaction and flow of command, with special reference to curriculum, examinations and textbooks.

CURRICULUM

West Bengal Board

In designing suitable curricula and syllabi for the different stages of education, the state Governments in India are required to implement the national guidelines, as envisaged by the National Policy on Education. However, giving due recognition to regional variations, even the Kothari Commission had concluded that the 'national standard implies only a minimum below which no state be allowed to fall.' In the absence of clarity of vision regarding the extent to which states may differ from the Centre's mandate in their curriculum-framing exercise, and on what grounds, a certain amount of disagreement is inevitable.

In West Bengal too, the major guidelines in the national pattern are duly considered. However, there are significant areas of overlap as well as variation between the curricula of the West Bengal Board, those of other State Boards as well as the centrally managed Boards. This section attempts to delineate the broad contours of the state Board's curriculum and syllabi at primary and secondary stages. The stress is on recent curricular changes where they have been carried out, and past continuities where they have not.

(1) Primary Education

According to 1997-98 figures, there were 51021 primary institutions in the state, with 8907736 students enrolled in them.¹⁵ The West Bengal Board of Primary Education (Discussed earlier) provides by regulations, on the basis of the recommendations of the curriculum committee, the syllabus to be studied by the primary schools under its jurisdiction.

The existing Primary stage curriculum, being followed since 1981, was framed by a committee under the Chairmanship of Shri H.B. Majumdar¹⁶. The Committee, during its exercise, had solicited the opinions of teachers and other interested people through newspaper advertisements, and also consulted representatives of the NCERT. That the national perspective was kept into account cannot be denied. However, the curriculum which was framed more than two decades ago has seen no significant changes since then.

According to the School Education Committee set up by the West Bengal Govt. through a notification dated 20th September 2001, the knowledge, skills and values to be imparted to the students of primary school are so basic in nature that the curriculum does

¹⁵ Narula and Majumdar, 2001

¹⁶ Report of the School Education Committee, the Department of School Education, Govt. of West Bengal, submitted on 31st December, 2002

not require frequent alteration. This may be true to an extent. However, the last few decades have seen tremendous innovations in every sphere. Surely, primary curricula and teaching methods could also allow for some innovation, making the learning process more interesting for young learners.

In this context, it needs to be noted, however, that the primary stage curriculum followed by other states is very similar to that followed by West Bengal¹⁷. The only major point of difference lies in the position of the second language in the prescribed curricula. Following the Majumdar Committee's recommendations, teaching of English as a second language at the primary level had been discontinued. According to the Mitra Commission, this was a pattern that was already being followed by most other states. However, owing to public discontent, the Mitra Commission recommended that English as a compulsory second language be added to the curriculum of class five from 1994. Subsequently, on the basis of the recommendation by the one-man committee set up with Professor Pabitra Sarkar as Chairman to examine the issue of teaching of English at the primary level, English as a compulsory language was introduced from Class Three in the year 1999. From the previous academic session, English has again begun to be taught from Class One in Bengali medium schools affiliated to the Board¹⁸.

A discussion on primary education should also include a discussion on pre-primary education. According to 1997-98 figures, there were 789 recognized pre-primary institutions in the state.¹⁹ Research by educationists confirms that this is an important stage in the child's development process, wrong handling of which may prove to be counter-productive. The Majumdar Committee recommends that there should be a provision for this class with a separate teacher in the primary schools. However, this provision is mostly followed in its breach.

(2) Secondary and Higher Secondary Education

The West Bengal Board of Secondary Education and the West Bengal Council of Higher Education (Discussed earlier) provide by regulations, on the basis of the recommendations of the Syllabus Committee, the curriculum, syllabus and course of studies to be followed in recognized secondary and higher secondary institutions respectively.

With reference to the administrative structure, Secondary and Higher Secondary Education are handled by the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education and the West Bengal Council for Higher Secondary Education respectively. These are, at least theoretically, autonomous bodies whose decisions on academic matters, including those concerning curriculum and syllabi, do not require the State government's approval. This is in contrast to some other states particularly in the south, where secondary education

¹⁷ School Education Committee, 2002

¹⁸ Courtesy Shabyashachi Sarkar, Staff Reporter, Aajkal

¹⁹ Narula and Majumdar, 2001

falls under the jurisdiction of Government departments or directorates, to the extent that the final examinations are sometimes known as Government examinations²⁰.

However, a closer scrutiny of the composition of the West Bengal Board as well as Council adequately reveals that there is a heavy bias towards Government officials as well as other state Government nominees. This, and the fact that the grants-in-aid to schools are funded by the Government, ensures that the autonomy which is touted on paper may well be compromised in practice.

With respect to content, this state's curriculum has differed from the general pattern on two counts²¹. Firstly, while most states teach science and social studies subjects in an integrated form, under the West Bengal Board, these are studied separately. The second difference has been in examination regulation. In the centrally managed Boards as well as in the other State Boards, the Secondary and Higher Secondary Examinations test students only on the syllabus covered in class ten and twelve respectively. But in the case of West Bengal, the final examinations have been testing the students by taking the composite syllabi of both classes nine and ten for secondary, and classes eleven and twelve for higher secondary examinations. These differences have had a considerable impact on the curricular load of students.

Also, the West Bengal Board syllabus has, for long, been alleged to be light. In contrast, the syllabus followed by the centrally managed Boards, and especially the CBSE are broadly perceived to be superior in content²². This criticism is not unexpectedly harsh. Its truth can be borne out, at least to a certain extent, by comparing the success rates of students from the centrally managed boards with students from the West Bengal State Board in various all-India competitive examinations (Discussed in detail in the next section on 'Examinations'.) Even if one were to not look at performance in the competitive examinations at all, a general comparison of the state Board with the National Boards would reveal that the curricular content of the state Board lacks innovation. For instance, the CISCE curriculum includes projects, surveys and model-building to a very large extent. Students can expect a visit to the botanical gardens, a session with engineers before making a working model of a dynamo or a geographical survey.²³ In contrast, the State Board syllabus is theoretical and less activity-oriented.²⁴

Of course, that the State Board affiliated schools, and the Bengali-medium schools among them, cater to students from not-so privileged backgrounds cannot be denied. It follows that, at least at the secondary stage, the curriculum should be designed with the goal of imparting general education to a diverse student body that includes among its ranks members of the most economically and socially backward strata of society. Therefore, to the extent that secondary education can be viewed as the terminal point of mass education, the curriculum needs to cater to the requirements of all sections of society.

²⁰ Overview of Indian CET Policy Formulation, Centre for Civil Society, New Delhi, 2005

²¹ School Education Committee, 2001

²² School Education Committee, 2001

²³ Courtesy Rini Chatterjee, 2005 passout, St. Joseph's Convent, Siliguri

²⁴ Courtesy Nivedita Sen, 2005 passout, Calcutta Airport High School, Dumdum

However, the School Education Committee's report which held that upgrading the curricular standards of the state Boards would "frustrate the mission of mass education" is also not right. It would seem as though the masses in this state do not have the right to compete equally with students of centrally managed Boards in order to qualify for the prestigious all-India competitive Exams. There are significant differences between the perceived relevance and success of curricular patterns followed by schools under the West Bengal Board and those under the centrally managed Boards. Rather than lowering the curricular standards of the entire state, the focus should be on other alternatives to ensure education for those who find the standards of the Central Boards high.

Splitting the Madhyamik syllabus on the lines of the HS syllabus is one such alternative. Another innovative alternative could be to build in a certain degree of flexibility in the curricula in order to enable students to excel in areas of their core competencies. In this context, vocational education assumes importance and potential for excellence. A third alternative could be to make the public examination at the end of Class Ten optional, with only those students willing to move up to Class Eleven having to take the exams, as suggested by the NCERT-appointed Yashpal Committee's National Curriculum Framework Draft²⁵.

For decades, the secondary as well as higher secondary curricula in the state - affiliated schools had remained largely unchanged. However, the powers-that-be may have finally realized the problems inherent in rendering generations of students non-competitive and disadvantaged in their long-term educational and professional plans. Sweeping changes have –and are being – now carried out in the realm of curriculum.

The syllabus for the secondary stage has been in the process of revision. A new Madhyamik syllabus came into vogue in Class Nine this year. As a consequence of the changed syllabus, the examination pattern (discussed in the next section) is also being changed and will be implemented from the next academic year. Though the new system would be affecting all the Madhyamik subjects, the first language, History, Geography and the Life Sciences would see the maximum change.²⁶

Also, as a consequence of the HS Council's recent decision to hold HS examinations from 2007 on the basis of Class Twelve's syllabus only (discussed in detail under the next section on 'Examinations'), the entire HS syllabus has also been revised. Experts in all the fifty-four subjects had begun deliberations earlier in the month and the first part of the new split syllabus for classes eleven and twelve was finalized as recently as 17th August, 2005. According to the Council, information on separate syllabi would be circulated to all the affiliated schools in the first week of September, through a special issue of the Council's own journal, the *Sansad Pratichi*²⁷. In other words, detailed information on curricular changes is still privileged knowledge not available to schools!

²⁵ 'Schools fear quality slump', The Statesman, Kolkata Plus, Wednesday, 10 August, 2005

²⁶ 'No more essays, Madhyamik goes objective in '07', The Times of India, July 30, 2005, Kolkata

²⁷ 'Split syllabi finalised', The Statesman, August 17, 2005, Kolkata

Even the changed syllabi for English A and B and Bengali A and B for both classes eleven and twelve that was announced on August 17th was partial and piecemeal. While only the literary pieces in English A and B were provided, details of Grammar courses in Bengali A were not mentioned. The changed syllabi for Hindi, Urdu and Nepali were also not provided. The divided syllabi for these as well as other subjects are to be announced next month. Meanwhile, even though detailed information on the changed syllabus may not be available for at least three more weeks, teachers have no option but to begin teaching the subject, as the academic session has already begun in July. According to Ratan Laskar, Secretary of the Secondary Teachers and Employees Association, the bifurcation decision was taken in haste and it would take time for the Council to announce the complete and detailed syllabus of all the 54 subjects.²⁸

Not only does most of the new syllabus remain to be announced, but even in that part of the syllabus that has been released to the schools, errors and overlaps abound. For instance, some literary pieces such as P.B. Shelley's 'The Moon', which is already taught in the English B of class eleven, have mistakenly been included again in class twelve's syllabus.²⁹ As a consequence, uncertainty and confusion reigns in schools across the state, with many teachers and students expressing dismay over the random manner in which HS Council's proceedings have been conducted.

The preceding paragraphs illustrate how West Bengal Board and Council's curricula have been unchanged for decades. Even though changes have now been brought about, the process itself has left much to be desired. Regular review and upgradation of curricula is as important as ensuring that the process of adaptation is democratic, broad-based and smooth, with in-built channels of dialogue to facilitate a continuous exchange of views between Government Departments, Boards of Education and agents of civil society. The recent changes highlight that good intention can never be an excuse for bad implementation!

²⁸ Quoted in 'Council announces HS split syllabi', Kolkata Times, The Times of India, August 17, 2005, Kolkata

²⁹ Mitra Bhattacharya, ABTA member, quoted in 'Confusing course of study', The Statesman, August 18, 2005, Kolkata

EXAMINATIONS

The present system of examinations in West Bengal generally, and examinations being held at the Madhyamik and Higher Secondary levels specifically, has come under close public scrutiny, leading to numerous workshops, meetings and seminars being held. With the intention to address the lacunae that have existed down the decades, the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education and the West Bengal Council of Higher Secondary Education have formulated some suggestions in collaboration with the SCERT, leading to many changes being implemented in the pattern as well as thrust of examinations conducted by the Board as well as Council. This section of the paper examines relevant issues pertaining to school examinations conducted in West Bengal, with reference to their structure, content, parity, equity and effectiveness.

Structure and content

Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE)

The Examinations of classes ten and twelve of CBSE-affiliated schools in the state are conducted by the Board, which is an autonomous examining Body. The Board appoints its own experts to sets question papers on the basis of the NCERT curriculum. CBSE appoints its examiners based on their qualifications and experience. For all other classes, the affiliated schools are required to adhere to certain broad guidelines in setting question papers. However, for all practical purposes, private unaided CBSE-affiliated schools have functional autonomy. This autonomy is lesser in the case of the KV's, which are more strictly regulated.³⁰

Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations

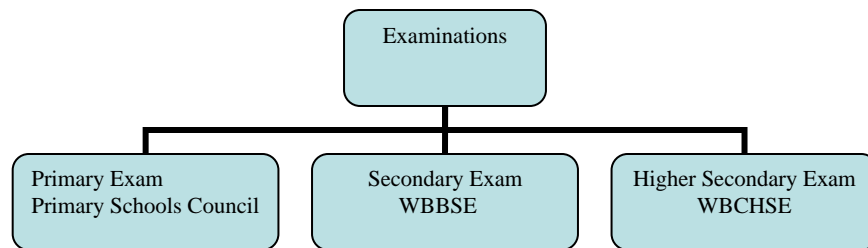
The Examinations in CISCE-affiliated schools in the state are conducted by the Board, which is an autonomous body. The CISCE examinations, unlike the CBSE and the state Boards, are based more on a general curricula than on specific textbooks.

West Bengal Board

The examinations for schools affiliated to the State Board are conducted in the following way:

- 1) Primary examinations are conducted by the Primary Schools Council.
- 2) Secondary examinations are instituted by the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education.
- 3) Higher Secondary examinations are instituted by the West Bengal Council of Higher Secondary Education.

³⁰ Courtesy Ratna Dhar, former Principal and CBSE (Class 12) examiner



The content of the examinations are determined by their respective Boards. For those batches sitting for their Secondary and Higher Secondary examinations, the examination is conducted by the respective Boards according to stringent standards applicable for all schools affiliated to that particular Board. For all other batches, examinations are conducted internally by the respective schools, albeit according to guidelines laid down by the Board.

Parity

For decades, a crucial point of difference between the State Board and the Central Boards has been that in the centrally managed Boards as well as the other State Boards, the secondary examination tests students on the syllabus covered in Class Ten only, and the Higher Secondary Examination tests them on the syllabus covered in Class Twelve only. But in the case of West Bengal, the Secondary Examination has been based on the syllabus of both classes nine and ten as a composite unit and the Higher Secondary Examination has been based on that of both classes eleven and twelve. From this academic session, the examination pattern of the Higher Secondary Examination has undergone a change. HS Council has announced last month that from 2007, the Higher Secondary examination will be on the basis of the Class Twelve syllabus only. This amendment in the examination pattern of the Council after years of status-quo has come under intense discussion. Some interesting patterns emerge, of change as well as continuity.

One persistent continuity is that the students of classes nine and ten who had been hoping for a similar reprieve in the form of a split in the Madhyamik Examination have been in for a disappointment as, in the case of this examination, the earlier pattern continues. According to the decision taken at the annual general meeting of the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education, the Madhyamik Examination may not split next year too. According to Board President Dibyendu Hota, the reason is that a split entails several related changes, starting with the syllabus. As the syllabus has been recast after four years of work, an immediate change is not possible. Another reason that was given by Board members was that the Madhyamik being the first public examination taken by a

student, it should be “integrated general education”, which cannot be diluted by holding the examination on the basis of Class ten syllabus only³¹.

The debate on the bifurcation of the two public examinations has had to face opposition on several counts and from various quarters. The CPIM controlled All-Bengal Teachers Association, which is also the largest teachers’ body in the state, has been completely opposed to a bifurcation in the State Madhyamik Examinations and a consequent split in the syllabi of classes nine and ten.

Incidentally, ABTA had also been opposed to leaving the responsibility of conducting Class Eleven Examinations to individual schools. In other words, it did not mind a split in the syllabus of Classes Eleven and Twelve, provided the Higher Secondary Council conducted both the examinations. According to ABTA Secretary Shibaprasad Mukherjee, this is because leaving Class Eleven examinations to schools would lead to “lacunae and compromises in the teaching-learning process.”³² This stand is difficult to understand, as no State or central Board conducts two separate public examinations in classes eleven and twelve. Further, this stand, if implemented, would not only have increased the burden on students but also created additional pressure on the West Bengal Council, thus nullifying any advantages of a bifurcation in the first place! Fortunately, a compromise of sorts has now been arrived at. Though the papers for both classes eleven and twelve will be prepared for the HS Council, the class eleven examination will be conducted by the respective schools and only the class twelve examination will be conducted by the HS Council.³³

Another disparity that the State Board has always been accused of concerns not the examination pattern per se, but the marks obtained therein. In other words, there has been a lack of parity between the marks obtained by students in the two All-India Boards and those obtained by students of Madhyamik and HS. To address this lacuna, a new Madhyamik examination pattern is now being touted by the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education, which has decided to reform the decades-old Madhyamik framework pattern by keeping in mind the examination pattern of CBSE and ICSE examinations. The Board has invited experts to a discussion on the subject. Though the change has been necessitated in part by the new Madhyamik syllabus that came into vogue in class nine this year, the chief reason for the proposed changes is to bring about an across-the-board parity in the performance of students.

The question papers in every Madhyamik subject are being changed. Where the old system contained 12-16 marks essay type questions, according to the changed pattern, the 2007 examination will only have specific, objective-type questions carrying three or four marks at the most. This, it is hoped, will reduce the incidence of erratic marking. Also, questions will be based on a through study of the entire chapter, in order to curb selective teaching as well as preparation. The Board intends to dispatch circulars to all its affiliated schools in order to orient them to the changed teaching-learning methods

³¹ ‘No Madhyamik Carve-up for now’, The Times Of India, Friday, July 29, 2005

³² ‘ABTA splits hairs’, The Statesman, Thursday, July 7, 2005

³³ ‘Council announces HS split syllabi, Kolkata Times, The Times of India, Kolkata, August 17, 2005

required to adequately prepare students to cope with the changed examination pattern. Model question papers will be drawn up and circulated among teachers. According to Board President Hota, “There will be a complete change of orientation from the past.”³⁴

As far as the Higher Secondary examinations are concerned, model question Papers and marks division of the question paper based on the new bifurcated syllabus are in the process of formulation and are yet to be sent to the affiliated schools. This is a cause for concern among teachers, who are confused as to what pattern they should adhere to, while setting the examination papers for the half-yearly examinations to be held in November in the respective schools.

Equity and effectiveness

This section on the effectiveness of examination patterns and the equity reflected in the results can be condensed into two constituent parts.

(A) The better performance of students in CBSE and CISCE affiliated schools on an average, as compared to those in State Board and Council affiliated schools.

(B) Within government and government-aided schools, the highly skewed performance of students, revealing the pervasive influence of rural-urban, income-class and gender disparities.

A comparative analysis of public examination results reveals that for decades, the average performance of students in schools affiliated to the West Bengal Board as well as Council has lagged behind those of CBSE and ICSE affiliated schools and their students. The All-India Boards also have a competitive advantage when it comes to pass percentages and compartment-to-clear pass ratios. The overall pass percentage of the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education conducted Madhyamik is 70%, and there are many schools which perform extremely well. For instance, South point school had sent up 850 candidates for the Madhyamik examinations in 2004. Of these, 787 scored 60% and above, and there were no failures. Other prominent Madhyamik schools such as Ramakrishna Mission, Carmel Convent and St. Lawrence also had excellent results.³⁵

However, down the years, there have also been schools in the city where less than 40% of students have qualified for the Madhyamik examination. Unbelievably, there have also been cases where all the students of a school appearing for the Madhyamik examination have failed³⁶!!! Since these schools enjoy grants from the State Government, the Government has the right to ask for explanations from the school authorities the reasons for their dismal performance. In the year 2000, at least 45 schools had been issued letters by the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education, asking for explanations for poor performance. Following a provision in the Board’s charter, initiating action and canceling recognition to the schools that had been performing unsatisfactorily for three consecutive Madhyamik Examinations was also considered by the Board.³⁷

³⁴ ‘No more essays, Madhyamik goes objective in ’07’ The Times of India, Saturday, July 30, 2005

³⁵ ‘Seat shortage shade on glee’, The Telegraph, Friday, June 25, 2004

³⁶ Courtesy Sarkar, Aajkal

³⁷ ‘Board threat to Madhyamik laggard schools’, The Telegraph, June 10, 2001

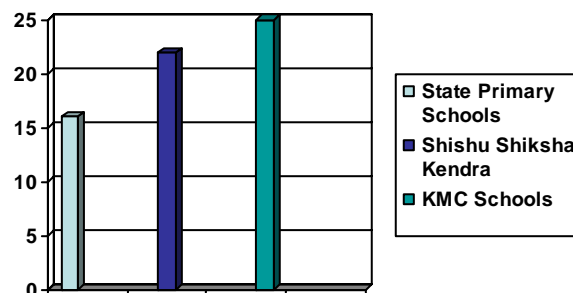
According to the President of the West Bengal Headmasters Association, the chief reason for this is actually government apathy, as many schools had neither the requisite number of teachers nor adequate infrastructure. Since the state already has an inadequate number of schools, closing down schools was also not a viable option.³⁸

Students of CBSE and ICSE affiliated schools also perform better in competitive examinations as compared to their counterparts from State Board schools. Students of the central Boards are better equipped to crack exams such as IIT-JEE as the questions are objective, whereas West Bengal Board, at least till now, had been giving more importance to theory. It is because of this reason that the State Board, is now trying to move from testing memory to being at par with the All-India Boards.³⁹

The disparity is not only between State Board schools on one hand and central Board affiliated schools on the other. Within the West Bengal Board and Council affiliated schools also, there are widespread disparities in examination results and performance. These disparities can also be analyzed with reference to rural-urban differences, income and class differentials and gender differences.

With reference to income and class differentials, the result of a survey of primary schools conducted by Dr. Amartya Sen's Pratichi (India) Trust has thrown up some interesting results. The Trust surveyed all three categories of Primary schools in the state and found that 73% of students in the State Primary Schools relied on private tuitions. For KMC schools and Shishu Shiksha Kendras (SSK's), the figure varies from 45% to 50%. Since many of children in these schools come from non-privileged backgrounds, they are low achievers. According to the Trust's reports, these figures are 25% of students for KMC schools, 16% for state schools and 22% for SSK's⁴⁰. Due to lack of good classroom teaching, the children need to rely on private tuitions. Those who cannot afford private tuitions get eliminated during the process of examinations.

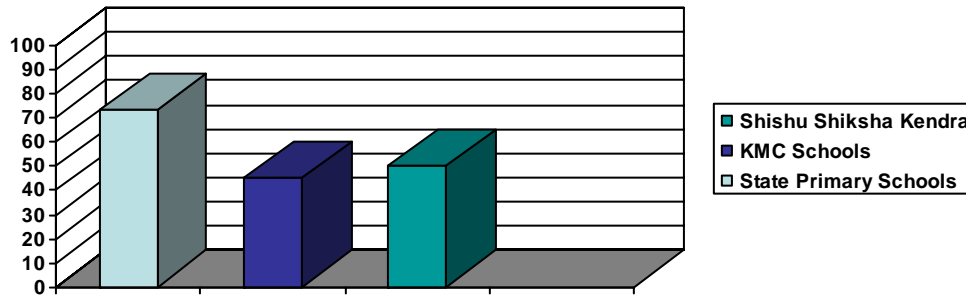
LOW ACHIEVERS IN STATE PRIMARY SCHOOLS



³⁸ 'Pull up you act, schools!' The Asian Age, September 4, 2000

³⁹ Richard Allen Flynn, Principal of La Martiniere for Boys, in an interview to Education Times, The Times of India, Monday, August 8, 2005

⁴⁰ 'Pvt. Tuition is a violation of kids' right to education: Amartya', The Times of India, August 8, 2005



NEED FOR PRIVATE TUTORIALS IN STATE PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Glaring disparities can also be seen with reference to rural versus urban and Kolkata versus backward districts of the state. Though these parameters cannot be separated from the earlier ones related to income and class, some additional points of information may be accommodated. For instance, according to the Sixth All-India Educational Survey, the percentage of rural habitations served by primary schools at a distance of upto one kilometre was 91.94 and percentage of single teacher primary schools was 7.21⁴¹. In 45 primary schools in the state, classes are held under the sun and a single teacher manages all the four primary classes in 254 schools. A total of 696 schools have no toilet and drinking water facilities while another 2710 have no separate toilet for girls. These schools are also characterized by teacher-student mismatch, with student-teacher ratio in 2612 schools being 74:1 against the norm of 40:1.⁴² These schools, mostly located in the backward districts, are characterized by a lack of interest on the part of students, which is reflected in low attendance rates and consequent bad performance in examinations, leading to a high drop-out rate.

Literacy rates are greatly skewed within the state, with 6 out of 17 districts having a much higher total literacy rate. These districts include Kolkata, Burdwan, Midnapur, and North 24 Parganas.⁴³ With reference to public examinations, the performance of many schools in the districts of Bankura, Purulia and North and South 24 Parganas has been abysmal.

Relatedly, another interesting observation is that on an average, students from prominent English-medium schools in the city perform better in competitive examinations than their Bengali-medium counterparts from district schools. For instance, in 2003, candidates from prominent English-medium schools scored higher in Joint Entrance Examinations (JEE). Nearly 75% of students who clear the common entrance test held by Calcutta University for admission to its Bachelors in Business Administration course are from prominent English-medium schools. The overall results of the Government conducted JEE, for admission of students to engineering and medical

⁴¹ Narula and Majumdar, 2001

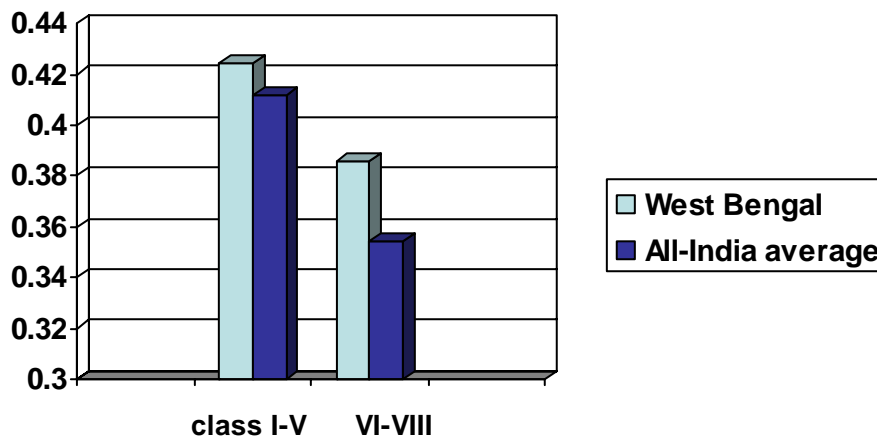
⁴² 'CAG report lays bare schools without roof', The Times of India, Kolkata, August 3, 2005.

⁴³ Narula and Majumdar, 2001

colleges in the state, also show that the performance of students from English-medium city schools is better than those of Bengali medium schools in the districts.⁴⁴

Finally, with respect to gender differentials, the literacy level of the state was 57.70% out of which female literacy rate was 46.56%.⁴⁵ It is common knowledge that in practically every state, the percentage of girls' enrolment to total enrolment is considerably lesser than the optimal 50% enrolled in school. In the fifth All India Educational survey, NCERT, New Delhi, 1989, the percentage of girls' enrolment to total enrolment was 42.44% in class I-V and 38.57% in classes VI-VIII. The figures are better than the national average, which is 41.16% and 35.45% respectively.

ENROLMENT OF GIRLS TO TOTAL ENROLMENT: A COMPARISON



They are also better than some states such as Bihar, UP, Rajasthan and MP. However, some states such as Karnataka and Tamil Nadu outperform West Bengal on this score.

The gap keeps widening as one moves up the education continuum, from primary to secondary to higher secondary stages. On scrutinizing data relating to drop-put rates, one finds that at the primary level, the drop-out rates are lesser than those for the secondary level. In 1997-98, the drop-out rate for girls was 54% at the primary level (class I-V) and 71.11% at the elementary level (class I-VIII)⁴⁶. The higher drop-out rate at class eight level is generally because of economic reasons, as it is mostly believed by poorer and uneducated families that education for girls beyond this point may prove to be costly and counter-productive.⁴⁷ As a consequence, the number of girls appearing for their Madhyamik and later, for the HS examinations reduces drastically. For instance,

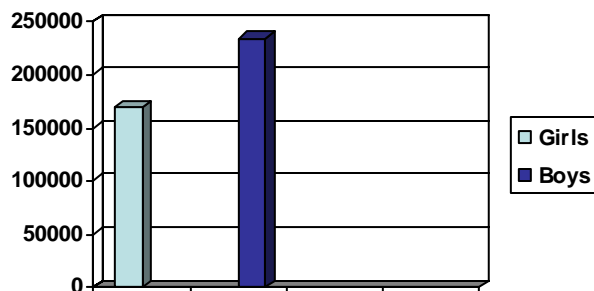
⁴⁴ 'English boost to entrance scores', The Telegraph, Tuesday, July 1, 2003

⁴⁵ As per 1991 census, Quoted in Narula and Majumdar, 2001

⁴⁶ Narula and Majumdar, 2001

⁴⁷ Courtesy Shweta Guha, Teacher, Deptt. Of Bengali, Children's Welfare Association High School for Girls, Behala

1,69,156 girls would be appearing in this year's HS examinations as compared to 2,34,072 boys⁴⁸.



A GENDER BREAKUP OF STUDENTS APPEARING IN HS EXAMINATIONS

In other words, the drop out rate for girls is higher in West Bengal as elsewhere, in comparison to the boys. Within the state, the distribution of female literacy and education is skewed. For instance, female literacy is among the lowest in the rural area of Purulia district.⁴⁹ As a rule, the average rates of female literacy are higher in the urban areas as compared to their rural counterparts. Again, as everywhere else, the drop-out rates are higher in rural areas for historical as well as cultural reasons, which act in a concerted manner with economic reasons to keep many girls out of school.

However, apart from the obvious reasons, the curriculum is also characterized by 'silent gendering' through which gender disparities are unconsciously transmitted to school children. For instance, according to a norm laid down by the Centre, textbooks must refer to women as often as they do to men, in order to cultivate among school children a sense of gender-equality, was also not followed in this state. A random survey of 500 mathematical problems showed the use of only 25 girls' names as against the names of 475 boys. Also, names and lives of eminent women were found to not be adequately included in the textbooks taught in the state-aided schools of Bengal.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ 'Coded textbooks for HS schools', The Telegraph, Wednesday, March 16, 2005

⁴⁹ Narula and Majumdar, 2001

⁵⁰ 'Left texts ignore rights: Centre', The Telegraph, Calcutta, September 6, 1999

TEXTBOOKS

Publication and distribution

Among the functions of the West Bengal Board of Primary Education is included the providing of textbooks to be studied in primary schools, on the basis of the recommendations of the curriculum committee. The West Bengal Board of Primary Education also undertakes the finalization of the manuscripts of the textbooks as well as their revision with the help of the SCERT. The provision of textbooks includes publication as well as distribution, free of cost, to students in government schools. These textbooks would be compulsory for all the schools under the Board, which number 20,000 approximately. This would also include free textbooks in five different languages – Bangla, Urdu, Hindi, Oriya and Nepali. In 1998-99, 3.6 crore books in these five languages were printed and distributed.⁵¹ The Board also publishes, from time to time, a list of books approved for use in primary schools.

80% of textbook printing is carried out by printing presses run as State Government Undertakings. After printing, the textbooks are dispatched to district headquarters, where they are stored in godowns. From there, they are sent to the Panchayat Samities and Municipalities as per the requisition submitted by the District Inspector of School (PE). From the Gram Panchayat, the books are distributed to the students through their respective schools.⁵²

The West Bengal Board of Secondary Education and the West Bengal Council of Higher Secondary Education can also undertake, with the approval of the state Government, the preparation, production and sale of textbooks for use in the recognized institutions. Additionally, these bodies also publish lists of approved textbooks for use at appropriate stages of schooling. This usually takes the form of recommending a very wide range of textbooks, if at all.

It must be mentioned at this point that private publishers have a lot of scope in West Bengal. Most textbooks from class six onwards are printed by private publishers, though language and Mathematics textbooks may be printed by the Board itself. Till very recently, the State Government did not take any stringent steps to ensure compliance by the private publishers with the guidelines laid out by the respective Boards. Apart from the use of those textbooks which are deemed compulsory for affiliated schools, the latter have had autonomy in deciding which books to subscribe to.

In fact, as far as school textbooks in West Bengal is concerned, it has been long alleged that while the Board as well as Council do frame a set of guidelines for the publication of textbooks, and recommend a large number of textbooks approved for use by schools, there is no follow-up to ensure that these are being adhered to. For instance, till last year, there was no system of numbering or coding textbooks in any way, and the

⁵¹ Narula and Majumdar, 2001

⁵² Narula and Majumdar, 2001

only regulation consisted of authors and publishers taking the permission of the Board or council for publishing them. This would lead to different schools prescribing to vastly different textbooks, with some far-flung areas following below-par textbooks, leading not only to the students learning less, but also paying higher costs as publishers would follow the practice of adding pages of unnecessary matter and then hiking up the costs.⁵³

In other words, there has been a lack of care in writing textbooks. This was the conclusion reached by an NCERT report that evaluated textbooks of class six to ten of schools affiliated to the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education.⁵⁴ Allowing private publishers to publish its books without ensuring compliance with the recommended curricular as well as other norms may be a reason why West Bengal had largely failed in maintaining a uniform pattern in textbook contents. This is in contrast to most other states which have autonomous bodies, controlled by their respective state governments, which can publish texts for government and government-aided schools.⁵⁵

Content

As a consequence of the above mentioned factors, many textbooks did not adhere to curricular guidelines. However, this is sought to be amended now. According to Secretary of the Council, Debashish Sarkar, special measures will now be taken while printing textbooks. Publishers would now send books written according to the new syllabus, which would be scrutinized by reviewers appointed by the Council. The books would be sent back to publishers for modifications and the books that met the Council's approval would be marked with a code. This would ensure that private publishers adhere to curricular guidelines and do not hike up prices and difficulty levels by adding pages and pages of unnecessary matter, from out of the prescribed syllabus.

Similarly, to ensure that schools follow only prescribed textbooks and do not subscribe to below-standard textbooks, the Council has asked its affiliated schools to adhere to the guidelines laid down by the former in the use of textbooks, and get their book-lists approved by the Council. Circulars on this matter have been issued to schools and according to Gopa Dutta, President of the Council, measures would be initiated against those schools that do not follow the prescribed guidelines.⁵⁶ Till last year, the schools had complete liberty in selecting textbooks, which, though a theoretical positive, was actually resulting in them prescribing to textbooks which left out important matter on one hand, and added additional topics relevant to engineering and medical entrance examinations on the other, causing confusion among students as to the actual components of the prescribed syllabus. The code numbers given to the textbooks recommended by the Council would now help teachers and students to identify the genuine from the fake. In other words, beginning from the next academic session, a uniform policy governing the

⁵³ 'Book list stricture for HS schools', The Telegraph, Tuesday, April 19, 2005

⁵⁴ 'Doctoring textbooks', Frontline, Volume 15, Nov. 7-20, 1998

⁵⁵ 'Left Texts ignore rights: Centre', The Telegraph, Calcutta, September 6, 1999

⁵⁶ Quoted in 'coded textbooks for HS schools', The Telegraph, Wednesday, March 16, 2005

use of textbooks in the state is sought to be brought in, wherein the more than 7000 HS schools⁵⁷ across the state would need a clearance of their book lists from the Council.

As far as variation in textbook content between the West Bengal Board and NCERT curricula is concerned, the ideological bent of West Bengal, its defense of its unique cultural history, as well as matters of routine negligence have all acted concertedly to cause divergences in textbook material. For instance, a historically biased viewpoint highlighting the communist cause and contribution to the exclusion of much else has long been the accepted content and continues to find articulation in textbooks of History. The 1993 NCERT Report which studied, among others, the History syllabi of textbooks used in this state criticized the West Bengal Board for allowing communal interpretations of History to remain in the books.

However, it must be pointed out that this kind of rewriting of History in school textbooks is an exercise that most states and even the centre have willfully indulged in, down the years. According to Prof. Romila Thapar, communal interpretation of History may have been delegitimised at research levels “by the sheer weight of secular scholarship in mainstream historical writing”⁵⁸, it still finds expression in textbooks at the school level. Concern over distortions in History has resulted in many workshops and seminars being held to protect the subject from bias, error and prejudice. Notable among these is the Kolkata Session of Indian History Congress that was held in Kolkata from January 2 to 4.⁵⁹

Some variations are also caused due to simple negligence. For instance, in 1999, the Centre accused West Bengal of exposing children to textbooks with no emphasis on fundamental rights. According to the Centre, most textbooks prescribed for students between classes six and twelve in the 51,000 state-funded schools in West Bengal did not sufficiently stress on Fundamental Rights. The non-adherence to norms laid down by the Centre regarding gender equality has already been mentioned.

Quality

While the costs of books published by private publishers may be higher, the paper and illustration quality, at least on an average, is better than those published by the state Boards. In books by the latter, many errors have also been brought to notice. For instance, in 2003, nearly one lakh students in several districts including Kolkata, Salt Lake and Howrah were given wrong information in their class five geography textbook, as a consequence of the West Bengal Board of Primary Education’s inability to recast textbook content in keeping with changes such as the formation of new states.⁶⁰ These books were distributed free among the students of the nearly 20,000 schools affiliated to the Board. Since they were compulsory, teachers were not permitted to prescribe

⁵⁷ Quoted in ‘Book list stricture for HS schools’, The Telegraph, Tuesday, April 19, 2005

⁵⁸ Quoted in ‘Doctoring textbooks’, Frontline, November 7-20, 1998

⁵⁹ Frontline, Volume 18, January 20-February 2, 2000

⁶⁰ ‘Errors abound in Geography textbooks- Haste to print averted update’, The Telegraph, Friday, May 23, 2003

alternative textbooks. The reason for the errors was that in order to bring about major changes in texts exclusively published by the Government, the Board requires a formal approval from the state School Education Department. When the manuscripts had been sent for to the press for printing, the Government order had not been obtained and the Board did not wait for that order to update the texts, as it had to distribute the books to the state-aided schools in May, by the beginning of the academic session! Similarly, in 2004, the English textbook prescribed for class eight by the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education spelt learning with an extra ‘n’ on the cover!⁶¹

However, books by private publishers may also have errors, and may be more expensive than required, while carrying below-standard content. The Paschimbanga Vidyalaya Paridarshak Samity, an association of school inspectors, had reviewed class nine and ten textbooks of Physical Science, Life Science and Geography, and found that unnecessary information was provided, beyond the requirements of the syllabus. The Samity asked the Board to fix a page limit and font size for such textbooks.⁶² The practice of coding to eliminate textbooks of below-standard quality has already been mentioned.

Review/feedback system

The academic session may begin in April, but whenever textbooks are reviewed or changed due to changed syllabus or other reasons, there are many instances of textbooks not being available to the students on time. In 2004, the West Bengal Board of Education changed the syllabus for many subjects taught in Classes six to eight, but the revised textbooks were not available for the students. While classroom teaching was carried on by teachers from sample textbook copies, the students had no textbooks to consult for making notes or revising. According to the Secretary of the Publishing Association, the changed syllabus was presented to the publishers in September. The Publishers presented their sample books to the Board in February and got them approved between April 24 and May 10. Book binders in Kolkata also added to the delay. Availability of textbooks also has a regional dimension. Since all the books are printed and published in Kolkata, people from the city and south Kolkata can get them more easily, while North Bengal being at a distance suffered more.

To sum up, it can be said that school textbooks in West Bengal do, on occasion, leave much to be desired, both in terms of content as well as quality. The channels of publication and distribution on one hand, and review and feedback systems for the purpose of upgrading content as well as redressing complaints are inadequate. It remains to be seen how the changes that are now being brought will rectify matters.

The paper now goes on to discuss two other forms of schooling – Madrasah Schooling and Open Schooling.

⁶¹ ‘State hands out lesson for kids to unlearn’, The Times of India, Tuesday, June 22, 2004

⁶² ‘Out-of-syllabus texts review’, The Telegraph, Monday, September 23, 2002

Madrasah Education in West Bengal

This is another debate that has cropped up, within the larger context of education policy for schools in West Bengal. This is an interesting, and hitherto largely untouched, arena for policy reforms and merits a closer scrutiny.

Background and Structure

Muslims account for 21% of West Bengal's population. Madrasah education began in 1780, when the Alia Madrasa College, Calcutta, was established by Warren Hastings in response to the demand of sections of Muslim population.

Madrasah is an Arabic word which means an educational institution. Though in essence, it has nothing to do with theological studies, in practice, Islamic theology has always been an integral component of Madrasah education.⁶³

Article 30(1) of the India Constitution holds that all minorities, whether based on religion or language, shall have the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice. Clause 2 of the same article holds that The State shall not, in granting aid to educational institutions, discriminate against any educational institution on the ground that it is under the management of a minority, whether based on religion or language.

In West Bengal, the Madrasah education system has been developed alongside the general education system in order to protect the linguistic and cultural rights of the Muslim Minorities in the state. There are three types of madrasahs – High Madrasa, Senior Madrasa and Khariji Madrasa.⁶⁴ The first two categories are registered with the West Bengal Board of Madrasa Education, which is a statutory body. In 1997-98, there were 477 recognized Madrasahs in West Bengal, in which 13989 students were enrolled.⁶⁵

Curriculum and Examinations

In High Madrasahs, Arabic is taught as a classical language. Apart from that, Mathematics and Social Sciences are also taught, in concurrence with the syllabus of schools under the Madhyamik Board. In Senior Madrasahs, Islamic theology gets the highest subject weightage as compared to other subjects. Though there has been some revision in the syllabus of these madrasahs, and an attempt has been made to successfully combine theological education with modern subjects, the curriculum still lags behind that followed by mainstream education on many counts.

However, khariji madrasahs present the most problematic category. These are madrasahs which are not recognized by the Board, but which continue to function

⁶³ 'Madrasa Education: Present Scenario and the Muslim Community', People's Democracy (weekly organ of the Communist Party of Indian Marxist), Vol. XXVI, No. 10, March 10, 2002

⁶⁴ People's Democracy, Vol. XXVI

⁶⁵ Narula and Majumdar, 2001

nevertheless. They only impart instruction in Islamic theology. Today, these Madrasas number over 500. Many such have sprung up in Murshidabad, Malda and Dinajpur.⁶⁶

The Madrasa education consists of three tiers – Alim, Fazil and Kamil. Following a demand of the state Madrasah board, the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education has recognized the Madrasah's Alim course as equivalent to its Madhyamik. The announcement was made after the Madrasah Board had incorporated conventional subjects in Alim, replacing theological studies. After the recognition was granted, students passing Alim are now eligible to seek admission to Class XI in the HS Council-affiliated schools and colleges. However, one point of complaint has always been that in the absence of Universities like Jamia Milia, Aligarh and Osmania where students can pursue higher education, students are forced to migrate from West Bengal at the graduation level.

General and financial administration

High and Senior Madrasas emerged after independence and received funds from the Zakat-e-Fitra at the primary level. However, the teachers of these Madrasas now no longer depend on Zakat-e-Fitra for funds. Instead, they are affiliated to the Madrasa Board and draw their monthly salaries from the Government treasury. Teachers with the requisite qualifications are selected through the Schools Selection Commission.

More than four lakh students study in 508 government-recognized and part-funded madrasas, and in the last budget, the Government allocated 120 crores for Madrasa education. According to the President of the Madrasa Education Council, the education standards of these Madrasas are the best in the country. The certification from the Madrasa Education Board is valid across India and students have the option of continuing in their chosen stream anywhere in the state or the country. Apart from funding essentials, the government also spends money for developmental purposes. For instance, Rs. 125 crores was spent for the installation of computers in 44 Madrasas.

However, Kharji Madrasas, which also serve lakhs of students, have an entirely different story to tell. According to the Imams Council, as many as 15,000 primary schools called Makhtabs and another 400 unrecognized Madrasas are languishing for lack of funds and running totally on donations from religious charities. According to a representative of the kharji Madrasas, many of these Madrasas have less than 700 students and pay paltry salaries, with primary teachers often getting only Rs. 500 per month. In contrast, government-aided schools may pay ten times the amount.

⁶⁶ www.bengalonthenet.com/education/madrasa.shtml

Conclusion

It would be wrong to dismiss Madrasas across the country completely, as even within its traditionally insular walls, some students have nurtured spectacular dreams and gone on to translate them into reality. There are instances of Madrasa students going on to become IAS officers, doctors and software programmers.⁶⁷ However, these instances are rare, as Madrasa curriculum is in general geared towards teaching Islam and not to equip students with modern job-market skills and orientation.

The requirement of modern times, therefore, is to integrate Madrasas with the mainstream education process, beginning by modernizing their curricula. There is an urgent need to upgrade the syllabus of High and Senior Madrasas in order to bring them at par with schools functioning under other Boards. For instance, even when adequate funds are available, there is no provision for Computer Training in most of these institutions.

At the same time, if hundreds of Kharji Madrasas are running, there must be a demand for them. Indeed, for poor Muslim families trapped in the vicious circle of poverty, agricultural debt and illiteracy, the provision of free meals and an assured job of a Maulvi for their children must in themselves be adequate incentive to enroll in these unaffiliated Madrasas. Therefore, instead of fluctuating between the two extremes of closing down these institutions completely on one hand, and neither taking any action nor providing financial help on the other, the Government needs to adopt a middle path.

Kharji Madrasa representatives have long complained that the Left has not drafted guidelines for recognition nor helped constitute Boards for the framing of modern curricula.⁶⁸ Now is the time to identify the genuine from the fake by beginning a process of negotiation to bring them under the aegis of the Madrasa Board, providing them with funds and helping them draft modern curricula and examination systems, while respecting their cultural heritage as well as functional autonomy.

Theology and study of Arabic as a Classical language may be included with the aim of acquainting present generations of Muslims with their ancient heritage. The curriculum may include Islamic jurisprudence, philosophy, commentaries of Quran, traditions of the Prophet and nuances of Arabic literature, but these components should, by no means, be given excess weightage. Instead, the stress should be on those components which can impart modern skills and technology to the children, in order to enable them to compete equally at the level of college admissions as well as later, in the job market.

Establishing religious institutions to teach theology may be a Constitutional right of minorities requiring no separate recognition by the Government. However, there is nothing in the law to prevent the Government from enumerating and registering the Madrasas operating within the State and regulating the opening up of further such

⁶⁷ 'Made in Madrasas', The Times of India, Wednesday, August 3, 2005

⁶⁸ <http://westbengaleducation.net/local/news.htm>, dated Wednesday, May 11, 2005

institutions that do not conform to the requirements of the Board of Madrasa Education, especially in border areas. Even in the remote villages, large and well-funded (by the Zakat-e-Fitra) kharji madrasas are running, while the primary schools may not have a roof. It may be better for these funds to be channeled towards creating educational, vocational and professional opportunities for the Muslim minorities in order to enable them to avail the fruits of the nation's development. It does not make sense to follow an academically irrelevant curriculum that leads to social exclusion and economic non-competitiveness. Modern education, beginning with school education, is essential for the development of the Muslims, who are an integral part of the state. At the same time, the stress should be on uplifting the poorest and most needy sections from among the Muslims themselves. These would also include girls, and special measures must be taken not only to reserve seats for girls in co-educational institutions, but also to encourage the establishment of schools and hostels exclusively for girls, with female teachers.

A COMPARISON OF MADRASAHS IN WEST BENGAL'S SCHOOL EDUCATION SYSTEM

	<u>HIGH MADRASAH</u>	<u>SENIOR MADRASAH</u>	<u>KHARIJI MADRASA</u>
Board Affiliation	Under the west Bengal board of madrasah education.	Under the west Bengal board of madrasah education.	Not recognized by the board.
Funding	Receive funding/aid from government	Receive funding/aid from government	Not funded by government
Curriculum	Subjects include mathematics, social sciences etc.	Modern subjects are also taught, along with theology	Instruction imparted only in Islamic theology.
Status of Arabic and theology	Arabic taught as a classical language.	Islamic theory given highest weightage.	Maximum weightage
Appointment of teachers	Through the School Selection Commission	Through the School Selection Commission	Not through the Commission
Salaries	Regulated, uniform	Regulated, uniform	Arbitrary

OPEN SCHOOLING IN WEST BENGAL

Background

Following the guidelines of the National Education Policy, 1986, the National Open School (NOS) was set up as an autonomous organization to provide open schooling facilities in the country. This gave birth to the idea of state networks of open schools to impart education and training in the regional languages. The Government of West Bengal established its State Open School (SOS) IN 1997, as a wing of the Education Directorate. Subsequently, SOS was registered as a society and renamed Rabindra Mukta Vidyalaya (RMV). From August 1, 2001, RMV was elevated to the status of an autonomous entity on the basis of an Act passed by the State Legislature⁶⁹.

RMV by and large follows the NOS model.

Rationale

West Bengal is one of the highest populated states in India. As a consequence, the State has found it impossible to garner adequate resources to meet the ever-expanding need of its population for access to education.

Recent reports on the failure of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan in Bengal highlight some very crucial aspects of the state's education system. Bengal has 10 lakh school children who have not received elementary education and only 35% of cluster reserve centres, intended to impart elementary education in clusters, are functional. Bengal's performance during 2004-2005 reveals that not even one of the 2,122 new schools sanctioned under SSA could be set up. Only 123 school building could be completed while 219 were still in progress. Only 3,706 additional classrooms could be created against the target of 38,158.⁷⁰ Only 14,685 teachers could be appointed against a target of 21,860, revealing that the state has managed to recruit only 23% of the sanctioned strength of teachers. Teacher training, which is a crucial input in SSA, has also suffered, with only 28% of teachers having been covered for training. West Bengal utilized about 83% of the Rs. 615 crore funds available to it under the SSA.⁷¹

	TARGET	ACHIEVEMENT
Cluster reserve centres	100%	35%
New schools	2,122	123 completed 218 in progress
Additional classrooms	38,158	3,706
Teachers appointed	21,860	14,685
Teacher training	100%	28%
Funds utilized	615 crores	510.45 crores

⁶⁹ School Education Committee Report, 2002

⁷⁰ 'Bengal joins Bihar in Sarva Shiksha doldrums', The Times of India, Saturday, August 6, 2005

⁷¹ 'Bihar fails miserably in school education', The Statesman, 12 August, 2005, Friday

Target Groups

One of the chief failures of SSA in the state is the low coverage of out-of-school children. Also, there are thousands being added every year to the already large number of children who are already out of school. According to the recent CAG report (2004), school drop-out rate in West Bengal during 2000-2004 was between 27 and 32%, while poor learning achievement was only 3 to 20%.⁷² Against this backdrop, open schooling can be seen to assume an all-important dimension. This is because Non-Formal Education (NFE), of which open learning is a major component, is a viable, cost-effective alternative to deliver mass education. The open school has the flexibility to frame its procedures and designs its programmes to meet the special requirements of its target groups.

Open School seeks to bring educational opportunities to two main categories.

- 1) Those who, owing to socio-economical disadvantages as well as physical challenges, are unable to avail of the formal system of education. This category of people are severely constrained by factors such as advanced age, occupations which deny them the chance to attend school, early marriage and household responsibilities, failure in formal examinations or physical infirmities that make mobility difficult. Other factors such as the rigidity of the formal education system which does not allow them to opt for subjects of their choice, and at their own pace of study, are also responsible for many remaining uneducated.
- 2) Those children of school-going age who, owing to their parents' poverty and backwardness, remain out of school for lack of opportunity and schooling facilities.

The School Education Committee was of the opinion that open learning best serves the need of category (1), as category (2) of students deserve regular, full-time education with its accompanying benefits.⁷³

Structure and Functions⁷⁴

The RMV is headed by an honorary Chairman, a Director and eleven other sanctioned posts, out of which nine are filled up with retired persons on a contract basis. There is one Group C and one Group D post. Though the RMV handles public money and is required under law to prepare budgets and get its accounts audited, there is no post in the field of finance and Accounts.

The RMV Act entrusts the Vidyalaya with the task of imparting education at Primary, Secondary and Higher Secondary levels through distance learning mode. The RMV operates through study centres spread over different parts of the state. These accredited study centres are largely located in schools affiliated to the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education and the West Bengal Council of Higher Secondary Education,

⁷² 'CAG report lays bare schools without roof', The Times of India, August 3, 2005

⁷³ School Education Committee Report, 2002

⁷⁴ School Education Committee Report, 2002

though some NGO's also run RMV's study centres. RMV grants affiliation to study centres and monitors their performance. At the schools final level, RMV has two sessions in the year, beginning from June and December respectively. However, at the H.S. level, the session commences only in June.

The minimum age for admission to the school final course is 14 years. There is no upper age limit.

Curriculum

RMV prepares its own curricula and syllabi. Under the RMV's programmes, learners have full autonomy regarding the choice of subjects, as they can select any subject or combination of subjects to suit their varying needs and preferences. However, if a student wishes to obtain a certificate equivalent to that of the formal schooling system, he or she has to take all the compulsory papers of the corresponding level in the formal system.

There are instances of open schools making use of modern communication equipment and technologies such as computers for imparting quality instructions. RMV has not yet adopted such programmes.

Textbooks

Learners under the open system have to depend mainly on self-study, making the preparation of study materials a very crucial task. RMV is responsible for the preparation of self-learning materials (SLM's) in thirteen subjects by subject experts, publishing them and distributing them to the learners through their respective study centers. In 197-98, there were 42 study centres in the state, in which nearly 2000 students were enrolled.⁷⁵ In fact, the quality and usefulness of SLM's is one of the strongest features of the RMV.

Examinations

RMV structures its examination process in such a way that its learners can take their examinations in a phased manner, according to their level of preparation. For example, they are given nine chances over a span of five years to clear the Madhyamik course, with the facility of accumulation of credits. RMV holds the public examinations and publishes results of its students.

The West Bengal Government accepts RMV's Secondary and Higher Secondary certificates as equivalent to the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education and West Bengal Council of Higher Secondary Education respectively. Some state Universities also consider open school pass-outs as eligible for admission in their undergraduate courses.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Narula and Majumdar, 2001

⁷⁶ School Education Committee Report, 2002

RMV and Vocational Education

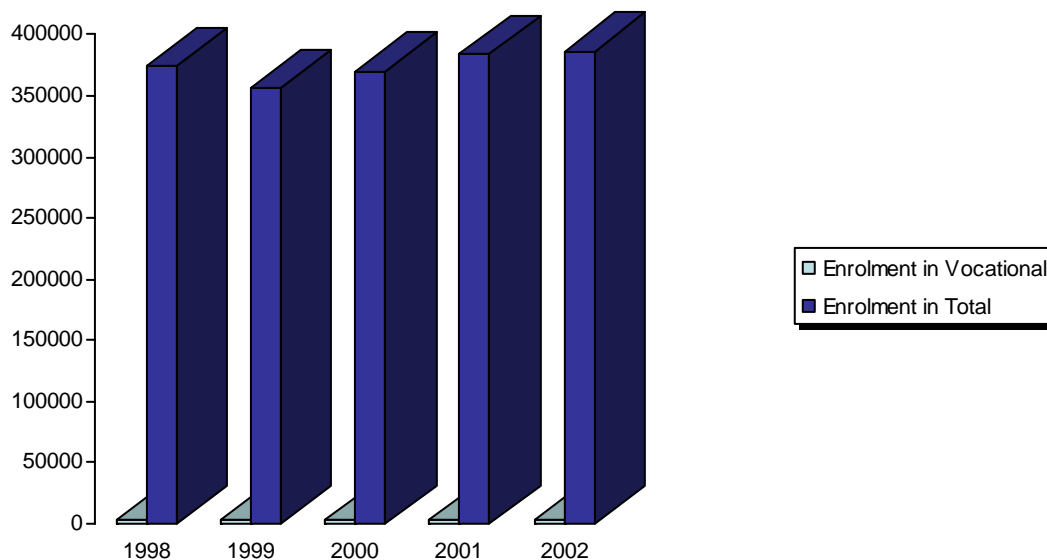
Vocational Education is ideally a component of formal schooling. However, some recommend that vocational education should be brought under the fold of the RMV. Also, it is believed that the RMV needs to be strengthened to the point where it can successfully bring in school-dropouts from all stages of formal education and ease their way into the appropriate level of open schooling. These two largely contiguous strands of thought make it desirable for vocational education to be examined under the broad heading of open schooling, as an area of independent endeavour as well as a tool to strengthen as well as be strengthened by the open school.

Vocational Education has a long history of Committees and Commissions. The Woods dispatch of 1954 first drew the government's attention to vocational education, after which there were at least five different committees dealing with this issue. After independence, the Mudaliar Commission (1952-53) and the Kothari Commission (1964) recommended bifurcation and specialization at the HS level. Finally, on the recommendation of the Ishwarbhai Patel Committee (1978), the vocational education scheme was introduced at the national level. Though the NEP 1986-92 set the national target at 25% to be achieved by the year 200, the actual achievement was only 4.8%. Though some states have performed much better than the national average, West Bengal has been an extremely poor performer.⁷⁷

In the present era of jobless growth characterized by the organized sector's inability to absorb even qualified people, employment and skill-oriented vocational education assumes increasing importance. However, many factors, social, cultural and psychological, have acted in a concerted manner to retard the growth of vocational education. Some of these are an arbitrary selection of courses without proper market-survey and need assessment, non-availability of quality instructional materials and poor on-the-job training, lack of flexibility in curriculum design and absence of vertical mobility in one's area of specialization, and historical and psychological preference for academic programmes and white-collar jobs. This adequately demonstrates how non-economic factors play an equally important role in deciding the fate of schemes and programmes. Man does not seem to be all that rational an animal after all!

Given the present economic realities, a large chunk of students may need to be diverted to the vocational stream. At the same time, the employability and professional advancement of these students has to be taken care of through innovative and scientific delivery of the vocational schemes. Bengal, being a poor performer and having a history of unemployables among even its qualified people, will have to divert some of its resources to this end. The role of the RMV in this regard will have to be discussed and streamlined.

⁷⁷ Report of the School Education Committee, 2002



ENROLMENT IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION UNDER THE WBCHSE⁷⁸

Challenges

The major challenge before open schooling, therefore, is to ensure a comparable quality of education as that provided by formal schooling. Open school deals with a heterogeneous group of learners with varying and diverse needs. They are mostly under-achievers, whose living conditions often do not provide a congenial environment for the pursuit of learning. Lack of regular contact with teachers as well as classmates impedes involvement, group cohesion and continuous learning. Hence there is a need for innovation in structuring new methods and programmes, such as increasing the number and duration of personal contact classes (PCP's) with non-rigid schedules to meet the varying needs of learners according to their locality and occupation. Other changes in dates and commencement of session, functioning of study centres, and use of modern technology in disseminating information can be brought about in order to make the learning process effective, after ascertaining the impact of such changes through regular survey and research.

Changes in the organizational structure of the RMV, such as instituting of regular paid posts, creating and filling up positions in finance, accounts and auditing etc. would also go a long way in streamlining the work of the RMV and making it more effective.

It is only with all these innovations that the RMV will be able to do its duty to the fullest in abridging the gap between the educated and the uneducated and imparting education to millions of disadvantaged people.

⁷⁸ Report of the School Education Committee, 2002

Summing Up

The school education scenario in West Bengal is undergoing a definite change. The dismal performance of schools affiliated to the state Board and Council in comparison to those affiliated to the Central Boards has finally forced the State Government to sit up and take notice. As a consequence, the recent years have seen far-reaching changes in curriculum, examination patterns and quality of textbook and all other major aspects of school education.

These changes have been effected with the purpose of bringing about parity with the Central Boards, and enhancing the performance of Government and Government-aided schools and their students in order to enable them to compete equally with the products of private unaided schools. These changes, some of which are an overhauling of the Madhyamik syllabus, splitting the Higher Secondary examination and bifurcation of its syllabus, streamlining the production and distribution of textbooks and maintaining quality and content checks through coding, have been discussed in detail in this paper. Undoubtedly, these are steps in the right direction and were long overdue.

However, many lags remain. There are glaring gender, rural-urban and income-class disparities in education, which is reflected in the performance of students in examinations. The shortcomings in West Bengal's Primary Education have been highlighted in the recent report of the Comptroller and Auditor-General of India, as well as the survey reports of NGO's like the Pratichi Trust. The weaknesses inherent in secondary and higher secondary education are revealed through a range of parameters, of which non-performance in all-India competitive examinations is just one.

There are many other all-encompassing issues such as those related to inadequate infrastructure, poor quality of teacher training and orientation programmes, and lack of proper inspection and supervision. Other channels of schooling such as open schooling and Madrasa schooling also cry out for reform and restructuring, in order to best serve the needs of a modern polity and an increasingly competitive job market. This paper has attempted to discuss these issues comprehensively in the preceding pages.

The need of the hour is to look ahead. This involves a two-pronged strategy of consolidating on past strengths on one hand and evolving a pragmatic approach towards rectifying weaknesses on the other. There is an urgent need to make the school education process more decentralized by providing more autonomy to schools while at the same time linking financial aid and grants to academic and overall performance. A viable incentive system may be discussed and implemented, in order to bring about efficiency in financial administration and equitable distribution of available resources.

Grading of schools according to their performance, facilities and strengths is one idea. A decision to grade CBSE and CISCE schools in the state has already been taken, wherein a committee set up by the state Government will frame guidelines for the grading of schools according to the quality of education they impart, their performance in public examinations, and the overall facilities provided by them. The committee plans to send

questionnaires to the schools regarding their pay-scales, staff members, fees and facilities, after which panel members would also visit the schools to frame the guidelines. The schools would then be graded A, A+ and A++.⁷⁹ Similar grading exercises could be carried out for government and government-aided schools in order to link aid with performance and encourage competition among schools for the provision of better facilities to their students.

A top-down approach needs to be discouraged, wherein hugely politicized Boards of Education on one hand, and insulated academic committees far removed from the multi-dimensional realities of school teaching on the other, dictate their terms and impose their mandate on schools across the state. In its place needs to be installed a system characterized by flexibility, innovation and public choice. Fruitful partnerships between governments, NGO's, educationists and other agents of civil society need to be built. Democratic Parent-teacher associations also need to be revitalized.

The world is changing at a fast pace and becoming increasingly competitive and skill-based. Education, if it is to serve any useful purpose at all, must reflect these changes truthfully. At the same time, to the extent that education is the most powerful ideological apparatus in the hands of any state, the need to maintain uniformity and balance in the content and thrust of knowledge cannot be overemphasized. The aim of education should be to liberate, not to indoctrinate. That is the only way ahead.

⁷⁹ 'Grade to guide fee for all', Kolkata, August 10, 2005