

Primary School Education in Kolkata, India: A Few Observances

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Abstract: - India is striving towards achieving universal elementary education. Sarva Siksha Abhiyan and National Council of Educational Research and Training have started many initiatives. These initiatives have yielded positive results. But, there are still some problems that have come to my notice since I have started teaching in primary school in Kolkata. This paper highlights these problems and recommends solutions.

Key words: first-generation learners, language load, migratory students, and universal elementary education.

I. INTRODUCTION

I have recently come into close contact with primary school teaching in Hindi-medium school in a densely populated market area of metropolitan city Kolkata in Circle 4. Here, the students are mostly first-generation learners. They basically come from the adjoining states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Their mother tongues range from Bhojpur with its many varieties, Maithili and so on. These and several other factors lead to several problems when they begin elementary education, which are discussed in this paper.

Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (SSA) was initiated by the Government of India in 2000-01 to address the needs of such pupils. Its aim is to provide proper free and compulsory elementary education in a time-bound manner. To this end, the -

1. SSA has started programmes for pre- and in-service training of teachers, as follows: regular 20-day in-service training for every teacher every year, 30-day training for newly-recruited teachers, and 60 day training for teachers that have not received pre-service training.
2. It lays emphasis on an optimum pupil-teacher ratio.
3. It provides grants to schools and teachers to develop teaching-learning materials.
4. SSA also provides free textbooks for all children without discrimination.
5. In accordance with the objectives of SSA, the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) has developed the National Curriculum Framework (NCF), 2005 to reduce the curriculum load and make learning more enjoyable for children by revising and reviewing textbooks.
6. It has helped in the establishment of Block Resource Centres to provide decentralized professional support to teachers, and textbooks, teaching-learning materials, etc.

7. SSA also supports remedial teaching of students.
8. Additionally, SSA also maintains data on teacher absenteeism, pupils' attendance, 'time on task' of pupils and teachers, professional competency, para teachers, etc. Alongside, NCERT also administers periodic achievement tests to students.
9. To facilitate capacity building in states, the NCERT as well as SSA provide academic and technical support. With the help of SSA, several states have started successful quality improvement initiatives like the Integrated Learning Improvement Programme in West Bengal. However, problems remain which need to be addressed.

Organization of the School System in Kolkata

Schools in Kolkata are organized in Circles.

Number of Circles and schools in Kolkata (2018-19):

Total Number of Circles in Kolkata	23
Total Number of schools in 23 circles	2105

Number and type of schools in Circle 4:

Year – 2018-2019	
Type of School	Number
Primary Schools under Department of Education	32
Primary with upper primary, sec. and H.Sec. under Dept. of Education	1
Primary Schools under Kolkata Municipal Corp.	8
SSK Schools	3
Private Primary Schools	7
Private Schools with Primary as well as Pri./Sec./H.Sec. Sections	11

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Total number of schools in Circle 4	62
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Number of Hindi Medium Schools in Circle 4 (2009-10):

Hindi Medium Schools		
Circle 4 Wards	Primary	Upper Primary
Ward 21	7	0
Ward 22	14	3
Ward 23	11	2
Ward 25	8	3
Ward 42	4	2

The Teaching-Learning Situation

The teaching-learning situation can be described as follows:

- a) Children who study in Hindi-medium schools often do not have Hindi as their mother tongue. Their mother tongues are Bhojpuri, Maithili and others. They have to learn to speak in Bengali to communicate in Kolkata, and learn Hindi as well as English.
- b) Teachers have Bhojpuri, Maithili, Bengali or others as their mother tongue and have difficulty in communicating with the pupils.
- c) Children are supposed to be admitted to a school which is near to their place of residence. They get midday meals in schools to ensure their nutritional status as the children admitted in government schools come from poor families.
- d) There are morning as well as day schools in very close proximity in such locality as the population residing in these areas is huge.
- e) Moreover, there are some schools which have only the primary section, some upto upper primary, and some till secondary and higher secondary levels.
- f) Affluence of the general population is increasing by and large. The rich and middle class people send their children to private, preferably English-medium schools. The poor children, who come to government schools, in such densely populated market areas of metros, often do not have even permanent dwelling areas. They are basically pavement dwellers. Their fathers work as daily wagers such as rickshaw or van pullers. When they are driven off the pavements, they move to other pavements; often to the city's outskirts.
- g) These daily wagers come from poor villages even from adjoining states. Their primary means of sustenance is farming, where they work as farm hands. Thus during the harvest season, they periodically move away to their villages.
- h) The children are also employed as farm hands, and while in cities, they engage in short-term business

activities, such as making and selling of gugal during the holi festival.

The consequences of such situations on children's education are unimaginable, as follows:

a) Children are periodically absent from schools. While they are absent, they unlearn everything. A class III student still does not know the alphabet either in English or Hindi.

b) Since there are many schools in the densely populated market areas of metros with some schools being only primary schools, and others upper primary, secondary or higher secondary schools, parents prefer to send their children to those schools which have till upper primary, secondary and higher secondary sections. This has two disastrous consequences:

i) In some schools with only the primary sections, there are hardly 10 students in the entire school. In comparison, in schools which have upper primary, secondary and higher secondary sections, there are about 150 students in each class of the primary section. Students from primary schools are admitted to upper primary schools through lottery, and thus, parents do not want to take the risk. There should be more Hindi-medium Upper Primary schools to reduce school dropout, as observed in DISE analysis 2009-10.

ii) Children enroll themselves in two schools simultaneously. For example, the children attend primary morning schools, alongside primary day schools. In the former, the children get breakfast, and in the latter, they get midday meals. Cost of schooling is no constraint since tuition, books, notebooks, uniform and shoes are free of cost.

iii) Schools themselves have the obligation to show they have a somewhat equal distribution of students in each class. Thus, while a student is admitted to class IV in one school, he/she is admitted to class II in another school. This situation is facilitated by the fact that the children do not have any birth certificate and, hardly, know the alphabet. Education in such situation is anybody's guess.

iv) To make matters worse, there are some schools-on-wheels run by some NGOs. When they have some assessment or fund money coming, they pick up such roadside children and begin to educate them. But such educational programmes are short lived.

v) When these children are compelled to move off to far away locations, they attend other schools. Some children have told me with pride that they know "so much" because they have attended 'four' schools in the primary section itself. Their "so much" knowledge consists of numerals 1-10 and copy-paste of the alphabet

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as pictures since they hardly know the sound of each alphabet.

Suggestions for Improvement

1. Primers which will help pupils to understand spoken Hindi and English first before they are introduced to the alphabet must be made available.
2. Some method must be undertaken to ensure that students attend only one school at a time.
3. All students from primary schools should be given the chance to study in an upper primary school near their place of residence. They should not be ousted on the basis of lottery. More schools of every medium (especially Hindi medium) should be set up till upper primary, secondary and higher secondary sections.
4. Some temporary or permanent staying arrangement must be made available, if their families have to relocate.

II. CONCLUSION

In heavily congested market areas, there are government and government-aided schools to educate the poor people's children. But there are many factors such as pupils with diverse mother tongues other than Hindi, migratory families, uncertainty regarding admission to upper sections of schools if students happen to study in schools with only the primary section for instance, and compulsion on the part of schools to fill their student roll sheets during assessments when they literally kidnap students from other schools, which act as impediments to study. The consequence is that pupils find it difficult to not only understand spoken English but also spoken Hindi, students study in up to four schools at the same time; suffer many gaps in education due to migration (during harvest season) or short-term work (such as making and selling gulal during holi); study in different classes in the different schools pupils attend simultaneously (in one morning upper primary school and one day primary school for example); and, consequently learn very little according to their age. Some remedial actions such as (i) strict action to ensure that students study in only one schools at a time; (ii) ensure that students get a chance to study in higher sections of other schools (at least till upper primary as per SSA) if their previous school was only a primary school for example and are not ousted on the basis of lottery, for which more schools till upper primary must be set up; (iii) arrange for some short-stay facilities for students whose parents migrate for work or other factors; and (iv) arrange for primers in Hindi and English to help pupils understand the spoken language.

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