

Decentralised Governance Reforms in Primary Education

Some Reflections on West Bengal

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Can decentralisation reforms in education achieve the goal of universal elementary education without removing the barriers of hierarchical social structure in West Bengal? A study based on fieldwork in Kalipur village of Dhaniakhali block in Hooghly district elucidates that the village education committees which are meant to ensure the participation of the village community, including the socially disadvantaged groups, in the management of universal elementary education, have been reduced to mere formal bodies and seemed to have turned into another tool in the hands of the party leaders to extend their sphere of domination. This article discusses the existing administrative structure of primary education in West Bengal and situates the functioning of village education committees in the larger perspective of the politics of primary school governance in the state.

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The attempt to achieve the goal of universal elementary education (UEE) is as old as the Constitution that placed special emphasis on it at that juncture (1950) when “the overall literacy rate was only 18% and female literacy rate was as low as 9%” in India (Govinda 2002). The Indian Constitution had then set a 10-year time frame to achieve the target of universal education in its Directive Principles of State Policy that stated, “The State shall endeavour to provide, within a period of 10 years from the commencement of this Constitution, for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years” (Indian Constitution 1950). Since then nearly six decades have passed, but the performance of the universal education project has been far from satisfactory, leave alone reaching the target announced in the Constitution. In the last two decades, the segment of literate population in India reached 65% (54.16% for female literacy) in 2001, up from 52.2% (39.29% for female literacy) as enumerated in the 1991 Census.

Who are being left behind in the run for education? It is presumed that the bulk of these unlettered people come from the socially ostracised scheduled castes (scs) and scheduled tribes (sts), women and Muslims, the latter getting prominence only after the publication of the Sachar Committee Report. While the literacy rate of the total population in West Bengal was 68.64% in 2001, it was 59% and 43.4% for scs and sts, respectively (*West Bengal Statistical Handbook 2005-06*) and 57.5% for Muslims (Census 2001). Notwithstanding the likelihood of inflating the literacy rate, these sections undoubtedly remained “backward” in gaining education in a state, where an

ostensibly pro-poor regime of the Left Front ruled for 34 years.

Why are these sections being left behind? Are they not inclined towards gaining education? According to a survey report of the Pratichi Trust Kolkata (2004), almost all the respondents in the surveyed sample expressed their eagerness in getting their children, including daughters, educated. In our study¹ we found the women of Basanti colony in Ultadanga in Kolkata, mostly working as domestic workers, were spending most or whole of their earnings in paying tuition fees for their siblings. Of late the state has enacted a number of legislations and has taken a host of initiatives, including the “go to the school” campaign to facilitate the universalisation of primary education. Despite the ambitious inscriptions in the Constitution to provide free and compulsory education for all children within a stipulated period, the Constitution had to be amended (the 86th amendment)² in 2002 to ensure free and compulsory education to all children and the government in 2009 enacted the “Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act”. What are the underlying reasons behind the perpetual failure to achieve the target of “Education for All” despite the adoption of such legislations and policies on the part of the government?

Against this backdrop the impact of policy reforms to implement decentralisation of governance in the sphere of education needs to be reviewed. The policy envisages that the local communities would govern the affairs of primary education themselves. But “...it is naïve to presume a strictly benign role of the community in school governance, without paying heed to the nature of the community groups, the degree of cohesion among them, and, more generally, the oppressive class system of the Indian society” (Majumdar 2003). Realising the highly stratified nature of local communities, representations from the traditionally backward groups were sought to be ensured while constituting village education committees (vecs) for administering the village primary school with a view to promote UEE.

This article explores the impact of their participation in the governance of the “temples of learning” in a society where for centuries learning remained the exclusive domain of the higher castes and the riches. Does the participation of the disadvantaged groups in governance of schools facilitate changes in the age-old domination of the higher-ups in the sphere of education? Does “the oppressive class system of Indian society” still remain a factor hindering proper realisation of such policy reforms at the grass roots? What roles do the organised political parties play in implementing decentralised reforms in education? Let us first discuss the existing administrative structure of primary education in West Bengal and try to situate the functioning of VECs in the larger perspective of the politics of primary school governance in the state.

District Primary School Council as ‘Political’ Administrator

It should be noted that the Left Front government, which was generally acclaimed for its successful implementation of rural decentralisation in the form of panchayati raj institutions (PRIs) took many years to prepare guidelines to implement the decentralisation reforms in education as a corollary to the principles laid down by the 73rd constitutional amendment. The Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE) set up a Committee on Decentralised Management in 1993 to formulate the guidelines on decentralisation reforms in education in the context of the 73rd amendment. According to these guidelines, the three-tier PRIs would form committees at respective levels to enhance the cause of primary education, the VEC being the lowest at the village level. But the West Bengal government issued notifications to form VECs only in 1998 after it was required under the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), sponsored by the Department for International Development (DFID) of the British government, which initially covered only five districts of West Bengal. It took another six years for the state government to initiate VECs throughout the state as part of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) programme (2003). One

would wonder why the same government that could rejuvenate the functioning of the PRIs throughout the state within a year of its coming to power took so much time to introduce VECs. Why was the Left-ruled state not inclined to implement the decentralisation reform in the governance of education? The evolution of the primary school governance in the state might offer some explanation to this question.

Most of the primary schools, particularly in the rural areas and in the “refugee”-inhabited urban areas in West Bengal were set up by local communities (in rural areas, by the landed gentry in the main) to provide elementary education to children. For some time, these community schools were not funded by the government. They were run by school management committees who used to look after everything for the development of the schools, from constructing school buildings to recruiting and paying the teachers. Afterwards the government recognised these schools and aided them. They became government-aided primary schools. After the Left Front government came to power, it formed the West Bengal Board of Primary Education (WBBPE) in 1981 and subsequently the District Primary School Council (DPSC) at the district level in 1990 to administer the primary schools. Though both WBBPE and DPSC were supposed to be elected, for long these remained nominated bodies (Chattopadhyay et al 1998). Since 2001, regular elections were held to constitute the DPSCs, but less than one-third of its members come through direct elections, while rest of the members are either government officials or nominated by the government. It is noteworthy that the most powerful and crucial post of chairperson is nominated by the government. In fact, only a few teachers’ representatives, three teachers per sub-division,³ are to be elected by the teachers, although the DPSC is assigned the job of making recruitments, transfers and promotions of teachers, which are vital for the careers of the teachers. It may be noted that the teacher community in West Bengal is fully unionised and they contest the election on behalf of registered teachers’ unions (RTU). The All Bengal Primary Teachers’ Association

(ABPTA), affiliated to the erstwhile principal ruling party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) – CPI(M) – was the biggest primary teachers’ union, having a membership of 1,14,306 out of a total strength of around 1,50,000 primary teachers in the state. Naturally, this union had more representations in the DPSCs.

Moreover, the leader of the main opposition teachers’ union, West Bengal Primary Teachers’ Association (WBPTA), complained that its members were systematically harassed by the DPSC authorities by way of transfers to faraway places and hence, most of the teachers preferred to remain loyal to the official union ABPTA. Further, he said that the representatives from their union could hardly get a chance to vent their grievances in the DPSC meetings and their opinions were never sought by the authority in any instance though their union was the second biggest in the state. During our interview with the Kolkata DPSC chairman in his office, one ABPTA leader, who was also a member of the apex body of primary education, i.e., WBBPE, was all along present intervening in the discussion presumably to project the official view of the ruling party. He was using the terms “our councillors” and “their councillors” while referring to the CPI(M) councillors and opposition councillors of Kolkata Corporation, respectively. The DPSC chairman seemed to have sanction to these terms, which shows how the primary education administration had been highly politicised during the Left Front regime.

Before the formation of the DPSC, the office of the district inspector (DI) was supposed to look after both the quality of education and the administration of the primary schools. The school inspectors who paid occasional visits to the schools to check the functioning of the schools were revered by the teachers. But later, the DI administrative functions were transferred to the DPSC and the DI office has been left with the job of only checking the quality of education being imparted. This has rendered the position of the DI toothless, bereft of its earlier power to take action against the erring teachers. The DI of Kolkata district opined in an interview that the management of

primary education by the DPSC was unnecessary. It has made the system complicated, time-consuming and politicised.

The Kolkata DPSC chairman commented that DPSC looked after the administrative problems of the primary schools while the quality of education fell under the jurisdiction of the DI. The DPSC chairman of Hooghly district admitted candidly in an interview, “we are burdened with administrative works without doing any fruitful things. Neither we could bring much positive effect in reducing dropout rates in the district nor do we have any assessment over implementation of the policies being taken with so much fanfare.” Evidently, the principal administrative tool for primary education is rather divorced from the urgent need of uplifting the system. Then how can one explain the necessity of constituting DPSC, if not for the purpose of regulating the vast army of primary school teachers for some purpose other than the betterment of the education system? In this regime of top-down administrative control over the fate of the teachers, the introduction of VEC seems to have not been received kindly by the then rulers of the state.

Village Education Committee and the Gram Panchayat

After launching of the SSA in 2001-02, VECs were sought to be introduced in every gram sansad (village council)⁴ of all the districts of the state and reconstituted “in view of the changes in objectives and the target group of universal elementary education”.⁵ In the relevant notification, issued by the School Education Department of Government of West Bengal, the following composition of the VEC was suggested: (a) gram panchayat member from the concerned gram sansad – chairperson, (b) head teacher of the primary school located in the gram sansad – secretary, (c) siksha sahayika(s) of SSK(s) functioning in the concerned gram sansad area, (d) anganwadi worker, (e) one or more member(s) from the managing committee of nearby upper primary schools/madhyamik shiksha kendra/shift school, (f) six or more parent members, including one parent member of disabled children of primary/upper primary school,

and (g) three nominated members: one person interested in education, one person from SC/ST community and one person from minority community. The above composition of VEC includes representation of teachers/parents of all the educational initiatives undertaken in a village under different government schemes.

The notification assigned the responsibility for constitution of VECs to the respective gram panchayats which would have the “power to monitor and evaluate the activities of (the) VEC”. The notification further stated that “the Gram Panchayat (GP) may recommend to the panchayat samiti to dissolve the VEC and seek advice to reconstitute any VEC”. Hence, the panchayat bodies are entrusted with sufficient power in both constitution and monitoring of the VECs. But in the highly politicised rural society of West Bengal, where PRIs are normally controlled by the parties for their own ends (Bhattacharya 1998; Bhattacharya 2002; Roy 2008; Williams 1999), there is always a possibility that these powers may be misappropriated in some form or the other. Interestingly, the VEC has been designed in such a fashion that it essentially becomes a nominated body, where, instead of being elected by the gram sansad, the selection of parent members is finally assigned to the local panchayat member as found in the government order below:

Parent members...will be selected by the Ex-officio members...by convening parents' meeting at Gram Sansad level. In case any dispute arises in selecting the members as stated, the panchayat member of the concerned Gram Sansad as Chairman of the VEC will take final decision in consultation with the concerned Gram panchayat and in that case the decision of the Gram panchayat member will be treated as final decision.

Among the nominated members, it is suggested in the order, “the persons interested in education” will be nominated by the *sabhadhipati* of Panchayat samiti and the members from the minority and SC/ST communities will be nominated by the GP pradhan. Evidently, the VEC is to be constituted essentially by the local GP with members of its choice. As the functioning of PRIs is controlled by the parties holding the panchayati power, where “it was only the politically well-connected

that benefited” (Williams 1999: 236), the VEC would probably be no exception. Hence, empowering the PRIs to constitute the VEC might result in exclusion of persons having differing political opinions and the enlistment of only the party loyalists in the committee. An earlier study, conducted in six GPs in the year 1994-95, reveals that most of the guardians, teachers and school committee members interviewed opined that “the panchayats were not taking adequate interest in proper management of village schools” and “the quality of education would rather go down if the panchayats were entrusted with the overall responsibility of looking after primary school system” (Acharya 2002).

Now let us look at the representation from the unprivileged groups in the VEC, i.e., those who are socially and economically in a disadvantageous position to enter into or be retained in the sphere of education. Apparently, women are positively discriminated in the constitution of a VEC. Among the six-parent members to be selected in a VEC, four must be mothers. If we include the shiksha sahayika(s) with these four members who are mothers, the proportion of the women members in the VEC more or less conforms to the norm of 33% reservation for the women which is generally practised in the contemporary reservation regime in India. Since women do not belong to a monolithic group in a society stratified on the basis of caste, class, religion, and party affiliations (particularly in the case of West Bengal), which strata and denomination of women are likely to find a place in the VEC? Given the existing social and political setting, the women from upper castes and classes and those loyal to the party in panchayati power are likely to get more representations in the VEC if there are no strictures on ensuring the representation of women belonging to the disadvantaged social groups.

It is an established fact in India that though in the recent period children from the disadvantaged social groups have been attending the primary schools to a greater extent, many of them are either yet to be enrolled or retained in schools. Hence, representations of these disadvantaged groups in the VEC seem

essential for the system to locate the nagging problems behind the lack of universal enrolment and retention in the primary schools. The government has prescribed only one seat in the VEC for the SC/ST communities and one for the minority. These allocations are certainly not proportionate to the population of these disadvantaged groups who together represent more than two-thirds of the rural population of Bengal (*Human Development Report, West Bengal, 2004*).

Thus, from the government order itself it is evident that the process of constitution of the VEC is neither democratic (i.e., not through the gram sansad meeting) nor does it ensure proper representation from the disadvantaged sections in the society.

The Functioning of VECs

This research has been principally based on field works in the village Kalipur⁶ of Dhaniakhali block in Hooghly district as part of a larger ethnographic study and also from experiences gained while working in a research project on primary education in the same block. The politics of the block, having a large presence of SCs and STs and Muslim communities (31.67%, 13.9% and 16.19%, respectively, of the block population), was dominated by the Left Front parties for long and represented by the Forward Bloc, a Front partner, in the state assembly continuously since 1967 to 2006 except for a term in the 1972-77 periods. So this area can be treated as one of the traditional support bases of the Left in the state. All the elections to the gram panchayat under our study since the rejuvenation of the PRIs in 1978 were won by the CPI(M). The gram sansad of Kalipur, reserved for SC/ST (comprising 64.5% of village population), was represented by a CPI(M) candidate who won the seat uncontested in 2003 panchayat elections. Notably, around 54.7% of the households of Kalipur, mostly from the SC, ST and Muslim communities, are landless.

Kalipur Primary School, one of the oldest primary schools in the region, is situated adjacent to the neighbouring village that does not have a school. The children of both the villages depend on this primary school though these two

villages have separate Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) centres, both of which are run in a single room of Kalipur Primary School. The school building is a concrete one surrounded by a boundary wall. The lady teacher-in-charge of the school, also the secretary of the VEC, said that the present VEC consisted of 13 members who were selected by the gram (village) committee.

The teacher-in-charge, Kalpana Das, hailing from the same village, was apparently a sympathiser of the CPI(M) and had been a panchayat samiti member for one term elected on the party ticket. Paradoxically she expressed strong aversion towards party politics and said that she and her husband had to be associated with the party due to some exigencies. They had a problem with their wealthier neighbour while constructing a boundary wall surrounding their house and had to seek the party's intervention to get the work done. After that her husband turned into a party activist though quite unwillingly. The village people, though, alleged that Kalpana could manage the job in the primary school by dint of their association with the party.

The VEC of the village seemed to be packed with sympathisers of the CPI(M). Among the 13 members of the VEC, at least five were known party leaders in the village, probably all of them members of the village unit of the party. Remarkably two of these party leaders were included in the VEC as persons interested in education. Among the four women members representing the parents, one was the wife of the panchayat pradhan (president), who incidentally belonged to Kalipur, and another was his brother's wife Pritilata, an active member of the Mahila Samiti (All India Democratic Women's Association) affiliated to the party. Another woman member representing the parents belonged to a family of Congress-turned CPI(M) supporters of the upper caste. The meeting of the VEC was generally held once in a month. The school teacher-in-charge narrated the way VEC meetings were held,

There is another VEC in the neighbouring village. As both are concerned with running of the same school, the two VECs sit together in meetings to decide things. Generally 9-10

members representing the two VECs as a whole used to attend the meeting. It helped to achieve the quorum of the meeting.

According to the VEC notification, a minimum of eight members are required for holding a VEC meeting. So the quorum of the combined VEC in the two villages should be a minimum 16. But that norm was not adhered to in this case where even the party sympathisers did not take much interest to attend the VEC meeting.

She further stated that the panchayat member of the neighbouring village hailing from the tribal community never took interest in attending the VEC meeting though he was the chairman of the VEC of that village. Later, in an interview, when the tribal panchayat member, Chand Murmu, was asked to explain the cause of his reluctance to attend VEC meetings, he replied, "The fact is that my presence is not at all necessary to them. They don't need me. Only when they require my signature, they come to me. As I could not read the papers, they usually explain the purpose for which signature is being taken."

It might be mentioned here that there was a number of adult literacy programme initiated by the government and one such centre, namely *Prabahan Shiksha Kendra* (Continuous Education Centre), had been running in the same village under the supervision of a CPI(M) leader. One would wonder why a person of the stature of a panchayat member still remained illiterate after so many years of adult literacy campaign. Here the version of one panchayat office staff and leader of the CPI(M) may not be out of context. He said,

Our party has a distinct political aim in working for literacy mission. As the opposition parties were spreading their influences in the countryside, the literacy mission was utmost utilised as a means to bring people closer to the party. The evening camps of Adult Education were turned into de facto party schools where not only syllables were learnt, but party's politics and ideology was also preached.... I won't say that none became literate in the process; but more could have been done.

Asked about her interest in participating in the VEC meetings, Pritilata said, "because I have read up to class VII, I was chosen as a member of the VEC. But I don't feel much interest in going to the

VEC meetings as they (party leaders) order me to do the petty work.” She also mentioned that important VEC meetings were usually held at the party office as, according to her, “the leaders attend those meetings”. According to the VEC circular, all VEC meetings must be held within the gram sansad area. But the CPI(M) party leaders, who did not belong to the village, called the VEC meetings in the local committee (LC) office to give instructions. Evidently, the centralised party apparatus tends to control even the village-level bodies constituted to enhance decentralisation.

Pritilata, belonging to a landless SC family, was in charge of seven self-help groups (SHGs) of the village and found to be quite active in attending party programmes as well as organising SHGs. It is astonishing why an activist like Pritilata does not have an interest in attending the VEC meeting, leave alone other women members who were very often selected because of their proximity to the party leaders. On the day of a VEC meeting, another VEC member, the wife of the panchayat pradhan, was seen taking rest in her house while the pradhan was getting ready to go for the VEC meeting. She had no knowledge of the meeting and had never attended one, and was very reluctant to attend such meetings. More interesting was the reaction of the pradhan about his wife’s lack of interest in attending the meeting. He said, “if my wife goes out, my family would go astray. So it is not advisable for her to go out.” This has been a clear manifestation of the patriarchal attitude prevalent in the society where women are expected only to remain bogged with household chores. Even a leader of the panchayat and a member of the CPI(M) like Malik proved to be no exception.

Incidentally, the panchayat is entrusted with implementing the decentralisation reforms in education and the panchayat pradhan is assigned the responsibility of selecting/nominating most of the VEC members. How would the VEC function if its members did not attend its meetings? Malik candidly said, “In fact, I, Manojbabu and Harubabu run the VEC along with others. All the members are

our party persons.” Malik seemed confident about the functioning of the VEC, which consisted of upper caste leaders like Manoj Dutta and Haren Chatterjee and a few party loyalists. But did he really lead the VEC as its chairman?

The common villagers were of the opinion that it was these two upper caste leaders who actually called the shots in running the primary school. There were complaints of corruption against both of them. People apprehended that foodgrains allotted for the mid-day meals in the village primary school and for nutrition programme in the ICDS centre were misappropriated by Manoj Dutta who had been in charge of distributing the same. The common villagers alleged that these leaders had no accountability to the community. According to the notification on VEC, its members are required to “place the accounts before the community from time to time for ensuring transparency”, but no such meeting had ever taken place in the village.

In fact, most of the common villagers were ignorant about the VEC and very few had actually heard of it, leave alone participating in its meetings. Even the secretary of the local youth club, an educated (graduate) popular social activist, expressed his ignorance about the existence of any committee named the VEC. But he was aware that some party persons had formed one committee for controlling the affairs of the primary school and meetings of that committee used to be held either in the school or at the CPI(M) party office.

The VEC Workshop

A VEC workshop for capacity-building of VEC members (organised for 25 VECs spread over two gram panchayats) threw ample light on the way the party exercised its control over the VEC. Each VEC was supposed to send four members to attend the workshop. But when the workshop started at 12 noon, only 15 persons were present. Many people joined the workshop later and the attendance rose to 50-55, but not all of them were VEC members. Among them, around 40 seemed to be actual VEC members while others were party activists, including a few leaders. The panchayat

members and the head teachers were seen attending the workshop. A few ICDS workers were also present, but their participation was more like volunteers than as VEC members. While speaking, some teachers stressed the need to include persons truly interested in education in the VEC. According to them, the present VECs consisted of many sleeping members who are not concerned with education. So the VECs should be reconstituted to include active and interested persons. But most of the VEC members present in the workshop delivered their speeches in such a fashion that it seemed everything was fine in the VECs. The critical views were only voiced but not discussed in the meeting.

The whole workshop was conducted by one resource person, Mrinal Sarkar by name, especially trained for this purpose. He happened to be a party leader and a member of the all-important LC of the CPI(M). Coming from an upper caste middle peasant family, he seemed to afford more time to party and related works, including the VEC. Asked about the impact of decentralisation programme on the progress of education, he said,

The children of the poor are now attending school. What more do you want? Even the women are coming forward now, though they can’t play much active role in VEC being engaged in household works when the meetings are held during the school hours. But if we postpone the meeting in the evening, the head teacher will not be able to attend.

The women generally remained busy in the daytime and evidently the teachers and the leaders were not ready to convene the VEC meeting at a time convenient for the women to join it. Are they serious about the participation of the women in the VEC meetings? It did not seem so from the talks with the leader. Rather he seemed to be content with the role of the party in leading and controlling institutions like the panchayat and the VEC.

He said that he was one of the three LC members conducting the VEC workshop on behalf of the party. Emphasising the overarching role of the party over institutions like the panchayats, he said, “I have never contested elections and did not aspire to become a panchayat member or a pradhan. I carry out more significant

works, the works of the party that controls the administration. We run the panchayats and guide the pradhans. You must have noticed them.” He indicated to the two pradhans, one a sc and the other a woman, sitting nearby on the chairs, both elected because of reservation. Both of them had not uttered a single word throughout the workshop, though they were the heads of gram panchayats, so fondly described as the local self-governments. In the whole workshop proceedings not a word was uttered about the quality of education being imparted or the problems of the first generation learners from the sc and st communities who constituted around 50% of the local population. The leaders seemed content with increased enrolment of the children from these backward social groups and were not very concerned about what they were learning actually.

Afterwards, when Khagen Malik, the pradhan, was asked why he did not say anything in the vec workshop, he said,

I have not given any speech in the vec workshop as the teachers present there were very learned people. They are so much educated and have so much knowledge that I feel quite insignificant and ignorant before them. So I was very hesitant to speak before them.

Remarkably, a person of Malik's stature, who was not only the chief of a gp, but also a leader of the numerically dominant sc community of the village and a long-time party member, did not feel free to speak his mind in front of people with a superior social, economic and educational background. If that be the case with Malik, one can easily imagine the position of other members of the socially deprived communities representing in bodies like the vec.

One head teacher of a primary school, Subimal Ghosh, who was a known sympathiser of the opposition Congress Party attended the vec workshop, but remained silent throughout the proceedings. When asked why he did not spell out his opinions in the meeting, he told,

I had many things to say but here the cpi(m) leaders were imparting the training. All members of the vecs belong to that party

without any exception. In fact, I am debarred from the vec, though I am a head teacher of a primary school.

How that could happen? He replied,

As I belong to an opposition party, I was excluded from the vec. There is one vec for two schools, including my own, situated in two neighbouring villages, as both the schools belong to the same gram sansad area. According to the rules, if two primary schools exist in a gram sansad area, the senior of the two head teachers should be the secretary of the vec. Being the senior, I am supposed to be the secretary of the existing vec. But still I was excluded from the vec.

Subimal Ghosh was not perfectly aware of the provisions in the vec notification which stipulated that in such cases, one of the head teachers was to be appointed as the secretary of the vec and the other to be included as a member of the same. Here Ghosh had been excluded from the vec presumably because of his political allegiance. Ghosh was also a leader of the WBPTA which was critical of the Left Front government's education policies. That was possibly another reason why he was segregated and excluded from the vec.

Education for All?

In the tribal hamlet of Kalipur, several tribal people expressed their discontent about the quality of education being imparted to their children. These people were mostly illiterate, facing the crucial problem of retaining their children, the first-generation learners, in the schools. They seemed quite concerned about the incompetence of the system to inculcate in their children an impulse towards learning. One tribal woman said, “Our children are going to the school for years, but we fear they are not learning anything. If we ask them to read or write something, they fail to do so. They are not interested in going to school.” Another woman said pointing her fingers to the teachers, “These teachers are not at all interested in teaching our children. They don't perform their duties properly and don't even come to the school on time”.

Suresh was a tribal youth who did not get the opportunity to go to school, but his children were attending school. He

was quite aware about and dissatisfied with the lack of progress of the tribal children. He said that their children were reluctant to go to school and left it after reaching class v or class vi. He said, “we remain engaged in menial works throughout the day for earning a livelihood, hence could not follow their studies. We don't understand why they are losing interest after some years.”

The veteran tribal leader Pakhi Murmu, who had been associated with the cpi(m) since the 1960s and led many militant movements in the early period, vented his discontent on the education system in a different way. Among his four grandchildren, only one had been promoted from class v to class vi this year. The remaining three, also students of high school, failed in the examination. In a well thought-out expression, Pakhi said that the teachers had intentionally disqualified his grandchildren. As he put it: “Had the teachers paid proper attention to my grandchildren, they could have passed the exams”. He was also concerned about filling the admission forms for his grandchildren as he was illiterate. Ironically, Pakhi showed complete ignorance about the National Literacy Mission and the Prabahaman Shiksha Kendra operating in the village for long under the leadership of the party to which Pakhi belonged for the last 40 years.

But, is it a fact that the teachers of the primary school do not pay proper attention to the children of the st/sc people? An observation of the class room pedagogy revealed something about the teaching and learning process which, in a sense, has been one of the most important factors for achieving uee. During our visit, classes for class iii and class iv students were seen being held at a time in a single classroom. What struck us at the first instance was an apparent division of the students into two groups, one small group marked with elegant dresses and appearances and the larger group with a wretched attire and appearance. The small group of students was very much responsive during the teaching hours and the rest remained inattentive to the lessons, not being involved in the process of learning.

That was the class for mathematics. It seemed that the larger group of the students was unable to follow the exercises that went on in the classroom. The teacher seemed indifferent to the majority in the classroom and was paying attention to the tiny section that was responding to the lessons. The teacher was reluctant to understand why a majority of the students were unable to do the sums and were lagging behind. Noticeably, the tiny section hailed from middle and upper class families belonging to the general castes, while the majority composed of SC and ST students. As the mid-day meals were being prepared in the kitchen outside, these children were peeping through the windows in an apparent gesture that showed their keen interest in the meals. They were nurturing the utensils with them that were to be used for collecting the food instead of taking care of their books. It seemed that they were waiting for the mid-day meals that they needed badly to satisfy their hunger.

While such was the situation in the school, one prosperous peasant belonging to the dominant Mahishya caste commented, "after introduction of mid-day meals, the conditions of the primary schools have worsened. Now only cooking and eating are taking place in primary schools instead of teaching and learning". One landless agricultural labourer of the SC community, though sceptical about the progress of education in the school, hailed the mid-day meal scheme. He said, "with the introduction of mid-day meals, the children have been benefited. At least they are getting some food. But we don't know what education they are receiving." It is evident that different social groups of the village have differing views on the government schemes on education and find different reasons behind the (lack of) progress of education in the schools. As these diverse views are related to conflicting interests of different social groups, the larger question is how these diverse interests can be mitigated by implementing the government policies? How can these conflicting interests be reconciled in a village body like the VEC, given the prevailing hierarchical relationship?

It is noteworthy that while the villagers at large were very much concerned about their children's education, and significantly about the quality of education, the leaders who were organising the VECs and managing affairs related to education were content about the progress in enrolment in schools. The CPI(M)'s zonal committee secretary told us that the state of primary education was progressing very well. He added, "We are trying through VEC to ensure enrolment of all the children of the village. We will be able to solve the problem of dropouts, if the parents could be made more conscious." These leaders were evidently indifferent about the quality of education, which concerned the SC and ST people most. To these leaders, the lack of consciousness among the socially backward communities appeared as the biggest hurdle on the way to achieving universal elementary education. But the "backward" people appeared amply conscious about the problems underlying the education system. Hence, there exists a huge gap in the perception about progress of education not only within different social groups, but also among the leaders and their followers in the SC and ST communities.

Conclusions

An earlier study on education conducted in four villages of West Bengal in 1978 had revealed a close correlation between educational achievements in terms of literacy and enrolment and agrarian class structure (Acharya 1985). It had also revealed a correlation between educational achievements and the caste status and income level of the rural people. It showed that "literacy and enrolment rates declined very steeply in accordance with the hierarchical order of agrarian society". This scenario has, to some extent, changed after the recent reforms in the educational structures. But have these structural reforms ushered in basic changes in the very hierarchical order that had acted as the principal obstacle in the way of decentralisation and democratisation?

As far as educational reforms are concerned, the achievement particularly in terms of enrolment has been spectacular

during the last two decades. Almost all the children are now being enrolled at the primary level of education as part of the government campaign to achieve UEE. But universal enrolment does not mean universal education and universal retention. The main concern expressed by the SC and ST people in the village was that most of their children were dropping out from the schools at the upper-primary level. The problems mentioned by them were varied but inter-related. First, these children are not getting proper education at the primary level and hence cannot follow the studies imparted in the upper-primary classes. Second, they do not envision much of a prospect in continuing education mainly because they lack the confidence to be able to finish the upper levels of education. These factors lead to lack of interest, failure to pass exams and finally massive dropout at the upper-primary level. There are other economic and social factors that are impeding the advancement of school education of these social groups. But, in the main, the disenchantment of the children to an unsympathetic education system seems to stand in their way to struggle for better education and better livelihood. The people hailing from the SC and ST groups recognise very much the importance of education like any other social groups and are ready to face hardships to get their children educated if they found their children were learning gainfully and satisfactorily.

The most important observation made by the SC and ST parents was that their children were not learning anything even at the primary level notwithstanding the spectacular improvement in enrolment. It means that universal enrolment and even retention at the primary level per se does not necessarily help to achieve universal elementary education or universal literacy. In our observation we found that many students of Class III or Class IV could not even read or write properly. The bulk of the students, mostly first-generation learners belonging to the backward social groups, seem not to have been attended to in the classrooms by the teachers hailing mostly from the higher castes and belonging to the middle/upper middle class.

The most remarkable thing is that the concerns of the sc and sr parents are not shared by the upper-caste middle-class leadership of the then ruling party who, in fact, run the system ignoring the role of the village community. These leaders expressed satisfaction at the high rate of enrolment achieved during the regime of the Left Front, but remained utterly indifferent to the poor extent of learning actually achieved by the children of these disadvantaged groups. Why are these leaders so indifferent to the gross deficiency in the teaching-learning process?

Actually they seem to be representing the prevalent view of the upper caste, upper/middle class people of rural Bengal who apprehend a decline of their age-old social domination in the educational progress of the backward communities. The rural society of West Bengal is still mostly divided into two social categories, bhadrals and *chhotoloks* where the *chhotoloks* belonging to the lower castes are supposed to do the menial jobs and remain subordinate to and serve the upper caste bhadrals. According to the dominant view of the rural elites, the enrolment of the sc and sr children in the schools seems more than sufficient in the present societal context. The educational institutions and related bodies like the VEC cannot probably remain uninfluenced by this dominant view since most of the leaders and teaching staff hailed from the upper caste/middle class background.

The question is whether the decentralisation reforms in education can achieve the goal of UEE without removing the barriers in a hierarchical social structure. Our study elucidates that the VECs, aimed at ensuring the participation of the village community, including the socially disadvantaged groups, in the management of the UEE, have been reduced to a great extent to mere formal bodies in West Bengal. The VECs, which might have been instrumental in accommodating the views of the unprivileged sections of the people in finding out ways to inculcate a real spirit of learning in their children, seemed to have turned into another tool in the hands of the leaders to extend their sphere of domination.

Thus, the recent decentralisation reforms in education in West Bengal has not probably been an effective means by itself to ensure actual participation of the deprived social groups and usher in substantial changes in the age-old domination of the higher echelons of the society in the spheres of education.

NOTES

[This article is based on the field data collected by Dayabati Roy while working on a research project titled "Education and Decentralisation in West Bengal" (2004-05) and as part of her doctoral thesis (2006-09), and by Partha Sarathi Banerjee while working on a research project titled "Actors, Policies and Urban Governance" (2006-07) and conducted by the International Institute of Social Sciences, The Netherlands. The authors are thankful to Manabi Majumdar and Jos Mooij for their inspiration in the writing of this paper.]

1. The study was conducted for the International Institute of Social Studies project "Actors, Policies and Urban Governance".
2. The 86th constitutional amendment inserted "Right to Education" for the first time in the Constitution, stating that "The State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of six to fourteen yearsThe State shall endeavour to provide early childhood care and education for all children until they complete the age of six years."
3. There are 2-6 subdivisions in a district. Hence, the numbers of teachers' representatives vary from 6 to 18, whereas the total strength of DPSC should be within 34 to 45. So, elected members

would generally constitute around or less than one-third of the total members of DPSC.

4. A gram sansad is the lowest rural constituency divided on the basis of electorate strength to be represented by one-panchayat member.
5. Quoted from the Notification of the School Education Department of Government of West Bengal, dated 23 May 2003.
6. The names of the village and the characters are fictitious.

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