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**Dialoguing Development: Glimpses of
the Pratichi Trust's Public Workshops**

Paromita Halder
and
Kumar Rana

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Chair: Amartya Sen

Managing Trustee : Antara Dev Sen

Registered Office
179 Ground Floor, Street No. 18
Pratapnagar, Mayur Vihar I
Delhi 110091

Pratichi Research Team
76, Uttar Purbachal Road, Kolkata 700078
Phone +91 33 24844229
Fax +91 33 24843205
e-mail: Pratichi_team@sancharnet.in

Santiniketan Project Office
"Sujan", Deer Park, Santiniketan 731235
Phone +91 3463 261508

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Dialoguing Development: Glimpses of the Pratichi Trust's Public Workshops¹

Introduction

The centrality of participation of the people at large in the process of development is a much discussed subject. Nevertheless, there has not been much clarity on the issue, particularly on the nature and degree of participation. Will the people be involved in “implementing” the programmes? Or, will they be incorporated in the planning of policy? Will “people” remain a “targeted” group of “beneficiaries” and their participation remain confined to their localities concerned and the programme? Or, will they become part of the “public” that includes not just the people but also the government and other civil agencies?

In fact, despite wider discussions, it seems that the basic concept of participation has not gone much beyond programme implementation – either in the government sector or in the non-government world of activists, academia, media, etc. There is a general belief among the so-called upper echelons of society that people themselves are not capable of taking part in policy formulation and planning and their participation is important only at the “field level” implementation. However, the Pratichi (India) Trust's work in the field of child education and health during the last decade gives us ample evidence that the notion of participation can be well extended to policy design and planning, with the active participation of various agencies, including the common people, government and other agencies, and others, provided the so-called common people are given an opportunity to speak out their minds, which, often work brilliantly and are expressed clearly in their deliberations.

On the other hand, unless people are given an opportunity to articulate their thoughts, based on their experiences, no participation

1. We are indebted to A J Philip for his editorial support and other suggestions. We are also grateful to Manabesh Sarkar and Saumik Mukherjee for their helpful comments and suggestions.

can be ensured. During the course of our field studies and other interactions with parents, teachers and other villagers, including the grassroots-level workers (ICDS and health workers etc.) we have heard a common complaint that “we are not allowed to talk (*amader baltei deyna*).”

In this context the Pratichi (India) Trust’s public workshops seemed to have played a crucial role not only in creating opportunity for those who were not allowed to speak but also in facilitating incorporation of those voices in the policies. Also, the deliberations in the workshops show clearly the possibility of an effective public participation through meaningful public deliberations involving the so-called plebes.

The Pratichi (India) Trust was set up in 1999 with the objectives of “working towards the removal of illiteracy and ignorance, the lack of basic healthcare, and the special disadvantages from which women (particularly young girls) suffer.”² It was aimed at universalising and improving the condition of primary education and primary healthcare along with eliminating gender disparities.

In line with these objectives, the Trust carried out a study on the delivery of primary education in West Bengal.³ The fieldwork of the study was carried out in May-July 2001 and the preliminary findings of the study were released on November 10 of the same year. In early 2002, the team made a second visit to the villages where the study was done and shared a Bangla rendering of the summary findings of the study. The parents and teachers of the villages read the findings carefully and gave us their clear opinions, which went in consonance with the findings.

The way people responded to our work made us believe that there was not only genuine concern for education among the people but also that they were the central force for a proper delivery of school education. The enthusiasm among the people to discuss the issues of primary education in West Bengal encouraged the Trust to

2. See, Amartya Sen, “Introduction” to *The Pratichi Education Report I*, TLM Books in association with the Pratichi (India) Trust, Delhi, 2002

3. *The Pratichi Education Report I*, TLM Books in association with the Pratichi (India) Trust, Delhi, 2002

organise a workshop of parents and teachers in order to build a platform for open public dialogue on the issues of primary education. The response of the parents and teachers to our invitation was overwhelming. The articulations of the participants of the workshop clearly brought out many real issues concerning the delivery of primary education in West Bengal (more on this presently). The meeting was organised on July 6, 2002, and was attended by 180 parents, teachers and some others. Professor Amartya Sen, Chair of the Trust, attended the whole workshop. The initial success of the first meeting led us to make it a regular feature: since 2002 the Trust has been organising at least one such workshop every year. Also, it was felt important to involve government officials and other activists in the meeting so as to discuss the issues face to face in a fully participatory way. Thus, since 2004, the workshops have been attended by a wide range of participants, including parents and teachers, government officials, representatives of teachers unions, elected members, academics, NGO functionaries, and so on (the 2003 workshop was held in Dumka of Jharkhand as the Trust carried out a study in that district⁴). These meeting had also gained much media attention.

The trajectory of the workshop was found to be quite interesting: while beginning with mundane shortcomings like infrastructure, the deliberations took a more complex route of discussing the nuances in education, health and child services. The present write-up is an attempt to see the centrality and the possibility of public dialogue in the process of development. Aside from the public workshops, the Trust has also been organising several other dialogues of teachers and other unions. However, we will largely deal with the larger public workshops.

The workshops

The first workshop on July 6, 2002, on ‘The role of parents and teachers in the delivery of primary education’ saw active participation

4. *The Delivery of Primary Education in Jharkhand: A Study in Dumka District*, Pratichi Trust, Delhi, 2003. A Santali rendering of the report – *Jharkhandre Etohop Secetreak’ Obosta* – was done in the same year by the Trust.

of nearly 180 teachers⁵ and parents from 36 villages across six districts of West Bengal.⁶

The second workshop was organised at the Social Development Centre in Dumka district of Jharkhand on July 6, 2003. The agenda of this workshop was the same as that of the first one. Active participation from parents and teachers of the 12 studied villages of the Dumka district along with the Pratichi research team offered a lively discussion at the workshop.

In 2004, i.e., for the third consecutive year, the Trust organised two workshops, one in the month of July and the other in the month of December. This year, it was a collaborative effort of the Trust, the Birbhum District Primary School Council (DPSC) and the Sarva Shiksha Mission (SSM), Birbhum. A two-day workshop on “The Role of Parents and Teachers in the Governance of Primary Education and the Mid-Day Meal Programme”, on July 15-16, 2004, was held at “Gitanjali”, Bolpur. Another workshop on the “Public Participation in Primary Education” was arranged at the Primary Teachers’ Training Institute (PTTI) at Shantiniketan, on December 22, 2004. These workshops focussed on creating a broad-based people’s movement to improve and universalise primary education. They gave substantial input and support to the implementation of the Mid-day Meal programme that was just launched in the state and was facing severe opposition from the upper classes of the society.

In 2005, the purview of the meeting was extended to public health and different dimensions of gender discrimination in addition to the general discussions on primary education (in the meantime the Trust’s research team had carried out a study on the delivery of health services in West Bengal).⁷ The Birbhum DPSC, SSM and Zilla Parishad collaborated with Pratichi (India) Trust in organising the

5. Including teachers of regular primary schools and *Sahayikas* of Sishu Siksha Kendra (SSK), schools set up in the underprivileged localities by the Panchayat and Rural Development Department. For details see *Pratichi Education Report I*, op. cit.

6. Bardhaman, Birbhum, Puruliya, Murshidabad, Darjeeling and Medinipore

7. *The Pratichi Health Report* ; TLM Books in association with Pratichi (India) Trust, Delhi, 2005

meeting entitled “Primary Education, Public Health and Development” on August 2-4, 2005. More than 200 parents, teachers, researchers, academics, government officials, health workers, from different districts of West Bengal attended the workshop and made it a grand success with their rich and thoughtful deliberations.

The meeting was organised at Bolpur on December 20-21, 2006, in association with the Birbhum DPSC, SSM and Zilla Parishad. This was attended by 150 parents and teachers of various primary schools across the state, the officials concerned and others. The agenda of this workshop was “Integrated Primary Schooling with Children’s healthcare”.

For the sixth consecutive year, on December 19-20, 2007, a public discussion entitled “Ensuring Child Health and Education and the role of Public Initiative” was organised in Bolpur, jointly by the Pratchi (India) Trust, Birbhum DPSC and SSM. As in the earlier workshops, a wide cross-section of people joined the deliberations and expressed their opinions.

In the seventh year, on August 7-8, 2008, the public discourse on “The Role of Public Initiative in Improving the Quality of Primary Education” was organised at Bolpur. Active cooperation and support were received from the Birbhum DPSC and SSM. This meeting was attended by nearly 200 people from various walks of life.

The eighth workshop, which again was organised at Bolpur, on August 2-3, 2009, saw active participation of parents, teachers from primary schools, Sishu Shiksha Kendras and Upper primary schools, teachers’ union representatives, government officials, researchers, academicians, journalists and many others. The agenda of the last workshop was “Syllabus, Teaching-Learning and Mid-Day Meal”. This was the first time that syllabus and curriculum of primary education was thought off as the topic of discussion. As in the earlier workshops, the Birbhum DPSC and SSM extended all kinds of support.

All these public meetings were enriched by the presence and participation of Professor Amartya Sen. Also, members of the West

Bengal Cabinet of Ministers, Dr. Ashim Das Gupta, Dr. Surya Kanta Mishra, Mr. Kanti Biswas and Mr. Partha Dey and the then Speaker of the Lok Sabha, Mr. Somnath Chatterjee, took part in most of the workshops.

Conducting the workshops

As a general practice, the selection of the parents and teachers is done from the areas where the Trust conducted various studies. Others are also invited keeping in mind the theme of the workshop. Invitation letters are usually sent to the invitees in a month's time before the workshop and they are also informed over telephone. Most of the participants from various districts of West Bengal come a day prior to the event. A concept note is distributed among the participants. However, their deliberations seldom remain confined to the note. Other important issues connected with child education and health care also come up during the discussions.

The main proceedings of the workshop start early in the morning with a welcome address from the research team members. The different sessions used to be chaired by Government officials and other dignitaries but during the last two years, teachers and parent representatives took up this responsibility. Usually three-fourths of the entire programme is devoted to the discussion of the parents, teachers and others and the remaining for the chairpersons of Primary School Councils of different districts, state-level officers and representatives of teachers' unions. The second session of the second day turns into an open session where the resolutions of the workshop are placed and other delegates, including Prof. Amartya Sen, offer their views and suggest policies for the future.

The progress of deliberations

The deliberations at the meetings involve a detailed and in-depth analysis of the issues concerned. In the first year of the workshop, a complaint was persistently raised from all sections of guardians and teacher representatives across the districts about the sorry state of infrastructural facilities in primary educational institutions such as

inadequate number of classrooms, lack of proper seating arrangements for both the teachers and the students, poor or no toilet and drinking water facility, inadequate number of teachers and so on and so forth. There were a large number of centres where teachers had to take outdoor classes due to paucity of classrooms and were, consequently, compelled to set the students free during the rainy season. Some centres had only one classroom where teachers had to impart lessons to four different classes by drawing chalk lines of divisions on the floor. Therefore, lack of concentration or attention on the part of both the students and the teachers was the order of the day.

At that time, the state of primary education in West Bengal was not considered to be satisfactory at all. There was high incidence of teacher absenteeism, the system of school inspection was almost defunct, lack of basic infrastructural facilities was widespread and it was particularly acute in the newly formed Sishu Shiksha Kendras, set up by the Panchayat and Rural Development Department.⁸ It was also reported that the students were victims of severe class and caste-based discriminations in the schools. All these problems became the focus of the Pratichi research team while conducting the field investigations for *The Pratichi Education Report I*.

Among the most important policy recommendations of the earlier workshop held at Bolpur-Santiniketan, two were implemented, at least partially, by the state government within this period. They are (a) the partial implementation of the cooked mid-day meal scheme with the stated objective of extending this scheme in 2004-2005 to cover all schools and SSKs, and (b) the formation of mother-teacher committees in selected schools, with the objective of ensuring parents' participation in school governance.

However, the most important achievement of the public dialogue

8. The SSKs are located in the areas inhabited mainly by the Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Muslims. In fact, nearly 80 per cent of the children enrolled in the SSKs are from these three communities, who are the traditional underdogs in the West Bengal society. In other words, the SSKs are the schools for the underprivileged, and they are small in both sense – number-wise and status-wise. They are not only attended by the children of the backward communities but are also run by low-paid teachers.

was not the partial implementation of the recommendations; rather the dialogue opened up scope for further and wider participation of the public in the debates and discussions. During the implementation of the Mid-day Meal programme there have been a series of consultancies across the state – at district, block, panchayat and school level. As it appeared, the common people who otherwise did not have any scope to participate in the process of schooling and education were encouraged to speak out their mind. We have heard in many villages, “*Pratichir mato sabha korte habe* – there need to be meetings the way the Pratichi Trust organises.”

The extension of discussion in the public sphere were also reflected in our next public workshops: in 2004, the main focus of discussion veered around the urgent need for a broad-based people’s participation in the governance of primary schools and other programmes related to the delivery of education. A demand for bringing together the parents and villagers in various activities of the school was raised. The active participation of parents in school governance and the proper implementation of the cooked mid-day meal scheme can complement each other and lead to a vast improvement in the quality of primary education imparted to the children of West Bengal.

In the next workshop in 2005 also, emphasis was given on the active public participation for achieving the goal of universalisation of primary education. As the Village Education Committees (VECs) were not found to be school-specific and in most cases inactive, the scope of parents’ participation was found to be restricted. Also, certain difficulties were noticed in the implementation of the Mid-day Meal programme in the schools. Constant demands for bringing in more transparency and eliminating bureaucratic hindrances from the management of the programme were raised by the people. In order to improve the situation it became an urgent need to ensure public participation along with firm government actions.

The Pratichi (India) Trust also carried forward the discussion this year to the sphere of public health. Different limitations associated with delivery of public health system at primary level were also

strongly pointed out by the participants. Mentioning the dreadful relation between poverty and health delivery system, it was clarified that common people were forced to depend upon the exploitative private health care due to the poor public health care system.

In order to address these problems, a public audit system needed to be formed for the successful delivery of the public health care system and at the same time information regarding health and health services should be made available at the grassroots level.

The main focus of the workshop in 2006 was on the interconnectedness of primary education and the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). It is clear that the ICDS holds the key to ensuring the health of future citizens, as it involves measures for providing good health care for mothers together with very young children (ranging from new-born babies to age 6) and prepares the child for future schooling by giving her pre-primary education. In one of its resolutions the Trust said ‘... the quality of the SNP should be improved. Regular training and refresher courses for the AWW and AWH are a must in order to ensure higher quality in the non-formal pre-primary schooling together with better health care services’ and in another resolution it was said that ‘It is especially necessary to increase the honorarium of the AWWs and AWHs...’

From the above resolutions it is quite clear that together with ensuring the training programmes of the ICDS workers and improving the quality of the Supplementary Nutrition Programme so that the children can get the best out of it, the public discussion focussed on raising the emoluments of the Anganwadi Workers and the Anganwadi Helpers. It also emphasised on building greater coordination among the ICDS workers, the primary school teachers and the Health Department in order to achieve greater progress in the provision of health services and education of the children.

In continuation with the stated objectives of the earlier workshop, in 2007 the discussion was again centred on ensuring child’s health and education and building up public initiative to attain the same. The various impediments in the implementation of the ICDS like irregular supply and inferior quality of ingredients, excessive

workload of the workers, very little honorarium etc. were repeatedly talked about and adopted as one of the resolutions of this workshop. Ensuring mother's health was identified as a pre-requisite for the development of child's health. In this regard, coordination with the health department officials was to be ensured. In order to strengthen and expand these efforts public initiatives and commitments should be built up to move towards public co-ordinated action.

Encouraging and bringing together the mass to actively participate in school chores and grant the parent-teacher committees legal power so that they are able to take authoritative decisions about matters related to the school was the thrust of the Pratchi Trust from its very inception. Keeping in view this objective, the most important resolution which came up in 2008 was that 'there has arisen a scope of building up a combined public initiative on primary education with the coordination of the parents, teachers, government departments and others. The scope has to be fully utilised. The government needs to recognise this scope and strengthen the initiative'. The above resolution suggests that the involvement of parents and villagers with the teachers and their joint participation in the school chores has actually improved the functioning of the schools. From supervision of the school building and other properties of the school to better quality and serving of the mid-day meal to the children, to formation of Mother-Teacher Associations for better interaction between the mothers and the teachers about the children are all the achievements of improved public participation. Now this involvement has to be carried further and needs to be extended to the government departments also.

Further, in this workshop the long-standing demand for empowering the Mother-Teacher Associations with legal provisions was again raised. This particular demand has got a wider relevance in the society as this, in turn, will provide the actual beneficiaries with legal powers so that discrimination and other malpractices can be checked.

In this workshop another important resolution of extending the

mid-day meal scheme to the upper primary classes was also adopted.

This issue was further discussed in the following year. Along with that the issue of syllabus and curriculum was taken up for the first time as the main idea of the workshop. Suggestions for bringing changes in the present syllabus were talked about to a great extent. A decentralised method of preparing the syllabus was thought of, especially for subjects like history and geography. The method of preparing the English syllabus may be replicated. Primary and upper primary teachers must be involved in framing the syllabus. They must also be absorbed in providing training to the teachers. These issues were adopted as the resolutions of that years' workshop.

Tracing the path of intervention of the Pratichi (India) Trust in influencing the governments' policy formulations

A close study of the resolutions taken in the eight workshops organised by the Pratichi (India) Trust during the last eight years reveals how the course of action changed from demanding the very basic necessities like various infrastructural needs to the much intensive and deeper issues like interventions in changing the curriculum and the syllabus of primary classes. It was good to see that the government replaced the dry ration scheme of providing the children three kgs of uncooked rice per month to the universally acclaimed scheme of providing freshly cooked rice and vegetables to the children in the school hours, known as the Mid-day Meal Scheme in the popular discourse. The parents and their children have greatly welcomed this scheme. But the basic objective of the Mid-day Meal programme has to be made clear to a section of the teachers, that it is not limited to a food dole programme, it has wider relevance to education, nutrition and development of a broader social outlook. From its very beginning it has been found that the Mid-day Meal scheme suffers from many deficiencies. The notable among them being the poor allocation of fund and the meagre salary paid to the Self Help Group members. The scheme has recently been extended to the upper primary level. But a universal coverage throughout West Bengal needs to be guaranteed along with improving the supply side

bottlenecks and other problems in order to utilise the maximum potential from this truly beneficial scheme.

Also, the government adopted the idea of forming a mother-teacher committee in every school so as to keep the mothers acquainted with the learning process of their children and also involve them in the various issues related to the school. The parent-teacher committee helps in organising some local resource to act as a buffer in those schools which suffer from the inadequacy of teachers and paucity of other resources. Involving the local people in the functioning of the primary school can really act as a stimulating factor towards improving the learning environment of the children, especially for the infants, and also creating a social audit structure to monitor the overall functioning of the school. The particular demand of providing legal powers to the elected parent-teacher committees was raised in order to legally empower the villagers so that discrimination and other malpractices can be checked. But this long-standing demand could not be achieved so far.

The demand for involving the primary school teachers in framing the primary syllabus was also accepted by the state government. Recently, as per the state government's directions, teachers from primary and upper primary schools were being involved in formulating English syllabus at the primary level. This has proved to be immensely effective. In the last workshop of the Pratichi Trust, most speakers offered positive comments on English syllabus and training. This process has to be made extensive. Special attention has to be given for preparing History and Geography syllabus for the primary classes.

Although the Trust has, since its inception, put a thrust on completely eliminating the practice of private tuition at the primary level, the problem seems to have increased manifold. In the first study on primary education carried out by the Trust in 2001-2002, the dependence on private tuition was found to be quite high. Around 57 per cent of the primary school children and 24 per cent of the SSK children were found to be privately tutored. But the situation has worsened since then. In 'The Pratichi Education Report

II' in which the research team visited the same schools and SSKs that it did in 2001, it was found that around 64 per cent of the primary school children and 58 per cent of the SSK children were taking private tuition. The workshop deliberations clearly pointed out that the only way of abolishing private tuition was the ensuring of quality education in the primary schools. While public participation was imperative for ascertaining quality education, such participation was also needed for changing the "culture of private tuition", which was so deep-rooted that even in better-performing schools, parents were seen to have resorted to private tuition for "even better" performance of the children.

To give a shape to the almost defunct system of school inspection every year a demand has been raised, but no heed has been paid to it yet. The school inspection system needs to be developed on an urgent basis.

Conclusion

The annual workshops organised by the Pratichi (India) Trust have gained immense popularity among the public. It has contributed in many ways to the lives of the people, especially the parents and the teachers directly involved with primary education. It has provided the general public a platform to speak; to make the others listen; to raise their demand; to raise their voices against the age-old discrimination and malpractices of the society. The workshops have provided a platform for the teachers to share their experiences, fight against various odds and continue with their motto to teach and educate the children. As one of the Professors present at a Pratichi Workshop commented "...The so-called 'race to equity' may never be over, since a state of perfect educational equality may not be achievable. Still, the existing situation can be perfected. For this purpose continuous public debate and dialogue involving all sections of the public is essential. An inspiring moment of participation as an equal caught our attention in this meeting when a Sahayika of an 'ordinary' SSK voiced her opinions and arguments in a free and confident manner sitting right next to distinguished professors, academics and

education authorities. This also presents to us a picture of empowerment. A participant sitting next to me commented, 'Mashima, we do not get any forum like this to talk our heart out.' It is in this sense that the assembly organized by the Pratichi (India) Trust was in its essence a 'public meeting'.⁹

9. English translation on an article by Ms. Manabi Majumdar, researcher at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta , published in the Anandabazar Patrika on September 2, 2009