

Penwalk
Experiences of Primary Teaching in West Bengal
Glimpses of Teachers' Writing Workshops

Pratichi Institute
in association with UNICEF, Kolkata

Penwalk
Experiences of Primary Teaching in West Bengal
Glimpses of Teachers' Writing Workshops

Preface
Manabi Majumdar
Introduction and Editing
Kumar Rana

Report
Manabesh Sarkar Susmita Bandopadhyay Toa Bagchi
English Version
Priyanka Nandy

Infrastructural support
Sangram Mukherjee Mukhlesur Rahaman Gain Pia Sen Saumik Mukherjee Sumanta Paul

Pratichi Institute
in association with UNICEF, Kolkata

Penwalk

English translation of *Kalamchari: Experiences of Primary School Teachers' as Written by Them*

First published 2012

Pratichi (India) Trust

A 708- Anandlok

Mayur Vihar I

Delhi 110091

Phone 011-22752375

Pratichi Institute

Burdwan University Building

EE 7/1, Salt Lake, Sector II

Kolkata 700091

Phone 033-23344229

Pratichi (India) Trust

Santiniketan Project Office

Sujan, Deer Park, Santiniketan 731235

Phone 03463-261508

Website: www.pratichi.org

Published by

Pratichi (India) Trust

June 2013

Contents

Preface

Introduction

Primary Education In West Bengal--- The teachers' perspective

Enrolment, Attendance and Drop-out

Our Schools and All Our Children

The School buildings and Class rooms

Meals at School, and Other Ingredients

Teaching and Learning: Various Aspects of Educating Children

School Administration

The Role of the stakeholders

Self-analysis and the way ahead

Selected Writings

PREFACE

The teachers who initiate primary education, who teach us how to read and write, what are their own opinions on schooling? How do they write and express their successes, problems and potentials? This Pratichi anthology has its foundations in these questions. The answers have been sought directly from the teachers' own pens, not from second-hand feedbacks. A lot has been written about teachers and their responsibility but strangely enough the teachers' voice remains unheard. Where are teachers' writings about the principles of education and ways of its implementation? In the ten writing workshops held across eight districts of West Bengal 348 teachers recorded their experiences and opinions. We thank them sincerely; they have allowed us to read and use their writings freely and without restraint, even in this age of aggressive copyright. Pratichi's chairperson, Professor Amartya Sen, has inspired and encouraged us constantly in this endeavour to find writers amongst our teachers. Our Managing Trustee Antara Dev Sen has provided every kind of help we could ask for. That writing is both a process and product of careful analytical thought has been highlighted by Rangan Chakraborty, in the 'Jor Kolome' writing-aid booklet he wrote for the workshops. These booklets were distributed amongst teachers to enhance their capability in writing, and to make them aware of this process. The workshops were attended by various experts: Gautam Ghosh, Manisha Bandyopadhyay, Sabir Ahmed, Monoj De, Ratan Roychoudhuri, Ashokendu Sengupta and Rangan Chakraborty. The production of this book was aided and assisted by Soumitra Sengupta and Monoj De, and Dilip Ghosh, Ashokendu Sengupta and Rangan Chakraborty have been a constant source of encouragement in the entire process. Pratichi is grateful to each one of them for all their help. The workshops were organised with the help of the All Bengal Primary Teachers' Association and Jansanskriti, and made successful by the hard work of Pratichi's Sangram Mukherjee, Toa Bagchi, Mukhlesur Rahman Gain, Pia Sen, Susmita Bandyopadhyay, Manabesh Sarkar, Saumik Mukherjee, Sumanta Paul, Priyanka Nandy, Shantabhanu Sen, Arabinda Nandy, Swagata Nandy, Mariam Begam, Sujata Gupta, Sakila Khatun and others. Considerable logistical aid was provided by Sujit Adhikari and Sandeep Das. I also heartily acknowledge the role of Manabesh Sarkar, Susmita Bandyopadhyay and Toa Bagchi in analysing and anthologising the write-ups. And I acknowledge with especial joy the very interesting introduction written by the Kumar

Rana, and all his editorial work. For any remaining slips, all of us at Pratiche embrace the responsibility equally.

Manabi Majumdar

Introduction

The present volume is one of the major outcomes of a series of workshops of a group of primary teachers. The exercise involved teachers' articulating their experiences and thoughts in written form rather than deliberating them orally. Distinct as the programme was, it took the general route that the Pratichi Trust has been following: combining research with public dialogue and discussion in order to shape public action.¹

From its very initiation, Pratichi (India) Trust has aimed at conducting research and developmental activities concerning basic education, public health and establishment of gender equity. In this momentous endeavour Pratichi has concentrated primarily on research oriented activities. As a start up organisation in 2001, the trust brought together a small group of researchers who conducted a survey on primary education in West Bengal. The journey started headlong from a small office in Shantiniketan. Since then, throughout the following decade the organisation has branched out its expertise in a number of directions. Besides primary education, extensive survey and research on health, mid-day meal, child development and other developmental arenas have been conducted. These reports have been disseminated for public dialogues and discussions. In this process Pratichi had to extend its base geographically to the neighbouring states of Bihar (in collaboration Asian Development Institute) and Jharkhand for researches on Primary education and public health.

We started operating from our Kolkata office from 2007 and finally in 2011 the research team finally took the shape of the Pratichi Institute. The Institute has been actively involved in various research initiatives with UNICEF Kolkata, various teachers' organisations, CRY (Child Rights and You), Asian Development Research Institute, Patna, West Bengal Sarva Shiksha Mission and Institute of Development Studies, Kolkata.

Research and Public Dialogue

Our first survey report on primary education in West Bengal was published in 2001 along with a brilliant summary from Prof. Amartya Sen which generated a great deal of active public debate. This debate instigated us further to shape the report in a more comprehensive form. We went back to the surveyed villages and shared the report and a translated version of Prof. Sen's summary. We sought to take back our findings directly to the villagers and elicit a firsthand feedback which met with an overwhelming response. We ensured that the villagers' feedback was incorporated in the final version of the report.

¹ Prof. Amartya Sen received the Nobel Prize in 1998. In 1999 with a part of his prize money Pratichi (India) Trust was established. The rest was used to set up Pratichi (Bangladesh) Trust. Prof Sen directly works with Pratichi (Trust) India as the Chairperson. Pratichi (Bangladesh) functions under the leadership of Rahman Sovan.

Not only did this exercise on public discussion enrich our report but also acted as a guideline to our future course of interventions. We felt the need of generating a sustained public dialogue based on the inference drawn from the survey and research conducted. Working on these lines we organised our first public discussion forum in 2002 in Bolpur. Teachers, parents and other representatives from different parts of society met and exchanged ideas on various issues in an open forum. The success of this discussion forum was quite unimaginable. It helped set up a tradition of public dialogue apart from enriching us with deep understanding of nuances of society and its changes. Having adhered to this tradition of urging public dialogues since, we have continuously organised open forums for newer insights. Despite his tight schedule, Prof Amartya Sen has been present on each occasion and actively participated in every interaction.

In 2010 we decided to augment the scope of research within public discussion thereby framing a more comprehensive outlook towards important issues. We organised an open forum on 'Right to education: the law and our moral responsibility'. The earlier open forums were principally interactive but now we requested the participants to pen their comments, to which 50 participants conceded.

There is, of course, a difference between verbal and written discourse, writing being a more structured form of expression. (In reality, West Bengal's educational scenario suffers from lack of writing skill, perhaps lack of proper exercise spurring it). However, when documentation added itself to interaction we found ourselves in the arena of application of written ideas in research.

From the primary teachers' point of view

Involvement with research concerning education for more than a decade had acquainted us with many teachers who are enthusiastic and possess creative ideas about education and other aspects of society. Besides, our collaboration with All Bengal Primary Teachers' Association, Bengal Primary Teachers' Association and other teachers' organizations for the past few years provided us with ample material for thought about the context, ideas and problems concerning teachers in West Bengal.

These frequent interactions with teachers and officials lay bare a fact that the school teachers often become soft targets once the questions on weakness and failures of the primary education system arose. Though primary teachers have their own quota of black sheep, there are quite a number of them who continue to battle hundreds of odds to keep the system functioning. We have been witness to a number of good precedents for example when a single teacher shoulders the responsibility of four different classes so that not one child goes astray. We have tried to highlight these success stories time and again in our reports. Yet there is a common tendency to make the primary teachers scapegoats for all failures in such a way that the good precedence is often nullified. Hence the obvious questions that should accompany the every success story are always left unasked. We never get to know the exact details about their motivation, nitty-gritty of

their context, pedagogical methods followed, their sustainability and replicability. In fact the other important questions that meet with silence are the reasons behind the failures--- whether the teacher by nature is an easy-goer? Are there any negative influences from the parents, community, political and administrative policy? Do the teaching methods get influenced by all these bottlenecks? Undoubtedly a teacher's characteristic traits have a sustained influence on his work. The proof lies in the fact that several teachers lock horns with severe situations to take their pupil through whereas some others conjure imaginary excuses to make-up for their lapses.

The decade-long experience has taught us that extreme positive and negative examples are always handful. The positive examples can act as trail blazers for others whereas the negative ones need gradual removal. But other than these two extreme categories there are a number of teachers whose efforts keep the system at its place. Optimising their strength and skill can enrich the primary education in a number of ways. For example we can consider those teachers whose entire energy is spent on 'managing' classes since there are not enough teachers. If they are relieved from the responsibility of 'managing', they can continue with 'teaching' which will be beneficial to the students. Proper training can help develop the teacher's skillset. Introduction to new pedagogical skill could present him with some additional tools to handle his problems better. Precisely, that was our aim behind holding these workshops---improving upon the present skillset of teachers through an exercise of ideating and penning it down.

But it was obviously essential for this exercise that the teachers reflected deeply on their current status of education and their role in it, the problems they face, what are their ideas of solution and how they view the policies. Their ideas can have the heir flaws but those flaws have their own significance since they take us back to the flawed context which generates them. As an example we can take the notion 'nobody should be detained in the same class.' Some believe that this is a flawed policy since weak students are moving on to the next class for which they are not academically prepared forcing the education system into a paralytic state. But this point of view stands directly in the way of modern scientific pedagogy. But once we delve deeper into the issue it becomes clear that this regressive point of view is directly related to his personal situation---infrastructural lapses, burden of too many pupils on a single teacher and so on. Besides this, there are others who value older codes much more than modern pedagogy or they have not been able to include themselves in the stream of academic discussions on pedagogy.

Context of written experiences

Our interaction with teachers for over a decade in the context of organising surveys and public dialogues confirm a fact that they have significant contribution to make which can become valuable for framing policy and implementing them and enriching pedagogical research. As an initiative to acknowledge their knowledge and skill we organised a series of 10 workshops in different locations of West Bengal within March and July 2011. The immense enthusiasm we

came across while proposing written workshops during our annual public discussion inspired us a great deal. The other inspiration was of course a desire to move off the beaten track and provide our research with an additional boost.

Majority of research entails gathering answers for a fixed set of questions from a particular group of people. Though it is possible to find unpredictable answers, but this system has its own set of limitations. Before organising the teachers' workshop it was not as if we did not have a fixed set of queries but one overwhelming quest that plagued us---In contemporary context, what are the teachers reflecting upon? What did they propose to do about them? Our intensions were clear. Without limiting ourselves with fixed questions we would pass the baton to the teachers themselves so that they can judge what is most important for them and explore the possibilities of solving it. These comments would not only mirror reality but bring into limelight the thought process instrumental in structuring it.

We often see that policy making procedure is controlled by a handful of experts and officials who seldom have a role in implementing the said policy. Therefore obvious lapses occur within the framing and implementation of the policy. If the point of view of the implementing authority receives due importance in the course of policy making procedure then it would make policy flawless and instil added vigour in the implementers. As we all know direct involvement ensures ownership and eventual success since the person's responsibility is no longer limited to following orders from higher authorities. Of course this does not mean that every teacher would be inspired likewise or the monitoring systems like school inspection should be done away with. But by the inclusion of implementers in the policy making procedure we can place them on a firm moral ground and make way for the policy to be much more foolproof. This was one of the most important targets that we sought to achieve by this series of workshops and indeed we have succeeded to quite some extent. The teachers have enlightened us about a host of issues, suggested solutions to some problems, guided us on the way ahead and above all given us food for thought.

When the teachers were engrossed in writing in the workshops their heightened concentration was awe inspiring. Each of them was in deep thought while penning their write-ups in the course of two hours. What generated such concentration? One of the teachers felt, 'It never occurred to us that we could give vent to our thoughts like the way we did today. This is an immense opportunity for us----not only could we speak for ourselves but could test our skills against others also.' This opens up an entire gamut of possibilities which if realised can enrich Primary Education manifold.

The other aim for organising these workshops, as recounted earlier, was skill building exercise by effectively using their penmanship. The teachers themselves confirmed that this would help them arrange their thoughts. Since there were no fixed questionnaires the teachers exercised their skill of prioritising the issue and present them in an organised format. A single exercise cannot,

of course, augment their skills to great heights yet it does herald a welcome start to a skill development project, which is indeed an achievement in itself.

The other target that we sought to achieve was helping out teachers from different parts of the state through mutual exchange of experiences. A teacher from Jalpaiguri may have something worth sharing with his/her counterpart at Purulia. The compilation of bitter-sweet experiences of fellow teachers can act as a guide as well as provide food for new thoughts and ideas. We sincerely hope that we achieve our third target with the help of this compilation. We are continuously receiving requests from various Government and other organisation for dissemination of this compilation which makes us further hopeful about the greater relevance of our venture.

Organising the workshops

In January-February 2011 we started planning the workshops keeping in mind our three major targets. Lalita Pattanaik who headed the education project at UNICEF, Kolkata during that time approved of our plan and enriched us with thoughts and ideas. We had been working with CRY (Child Rights and You) in Birbhum for some time and as a part of this we had published a small compilation of teachers' write-ups. On interacting with teachers, we found that they were enthused and made many valuable suggestions. The experience garnered from previous workshops and valuable comments from different quarters helped us draw up the final blueprint of the teachers' workshop. UNICEF provided economic assistance and participated in the workshops in a number of ways. All Bengal Primary Teachers' Association actively aided us in structuring the workshops. Janasanaskriti also helped us in organising the workshop.

Ten workshops were held in eight districts where 373 teachers took part. There were 348 primary school teachers, 16 SSK sahayikas and 9 social workers.

At Baruipur in the South 24 Parganas, there were 37 primary school teachers; Kakdwip had 18 primary school teachers, 16 Sahayikas and 7 others. In Purulia, the workshop was attended by 40 primary school teachers plus one more person. In Murshidabad's Baharampur, there were 36 primary school teachers. In Maldah, 34 primary school teachers attended. At Raiganj in North Dinajpur, out of 36 attendees, 35 were primary school teachers. In South Dinajpur's Gangarampur, 30 primary school teachers took part. At the workshops at Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar, 43 and 40 primary school teachers took part respectively. At Coochbehar, the number was 35.

While making the selection the emphasis on North Bengal was deliberate since going by development indicators in West Bengal the northern districts show extreme backwardness resulting from gross neglect. Similar backward trend can be noticed in Sunderban areas of 24 parganas, Purulia, Murshidabad and some other areas. This made us emphasize on backward districts. Of course the developed areas can offer us with a number of good precedents which can

serve as learning. The paucity of resources did not allow us to hold extensive workshops then but of course we have plans to spread our wings in future.

We had a distinct deliberation while choosing some district over others but while choosing participants we could not follow the random sampling method or statistically foolproof ways since we were incapable of such organizational arrangements. We had to dependant on the local teachers' bodies and others fully cognizant of the fact that the selection might have certain loose ends. Yet this initial weakness disappears once we come across the wide variety of issues that the teachers' raised in the workshops. Though we cannot label it as the opinion of West Bengal's teaching community but it surely voices an important stream of ideas.

The present compilation is divided in two sections: the first part is a series of analysis on important issues which has emerged from the write-ups; the second part comprises selected write-ups penned by the teacher so that the readers can come to their own conclusions. We could not publish all the write-ups keeping in mind the length of the book but we at Pratichi Institute have preserved every write-up for interested individuals. While selecting write-ups for this compilation we have been partial towards range of topics and real life experiences rather than writing skill. Some excellently written pieces had to be left out which we sincerely regret.

Society and the Primary Teachers

Let us now look into what the primary teachers have to tell us. The inferences drawn from the write-ups have been analysed and divided into several sections for better comprehension. Two principal streams of thoughts emerge if all the write-ups are studied carefully. The first points out towards the progress made in the arena of primary education in West Bengal, the second of course is an attempt to pull it backwards.

From a positive point of view, the enrolment and retention drive has been largely successful. Visibly the parents are eager enough to send their children to school. A section of teachers also attach a great deal of importance to it. Though not comparable with enrolment, regular attendance in school is also catching up fast. Quite a number of teachers are worried for not being able to reach the set target for attendance and have described their personal efforts to ensure proper attendance. This realisation that low attendance can effect a child's education as a whole is a sure indicator of the teacher's affection for his job. The quality of the lessons imparted and the level of learning of the students have also bothered teachers which have been repeatedly reflected in their write-ups. Some have elaborated pedagogical methods which have helped them achieve the aspired standard. The fact, that every child is different possessing a world of her own, has made its way into the minds of some teachers who have tried to devise ways to veer flighty students towards lessons using ingenious methods. In some of the write-ups we have noticed how they have discovered ways to fight the language barrier so as to communicate with their pupil and ensure their regular attendance. Some schools have helped the child, her parents

and the community as a whole to grow and improve socially. These success stories not only act as inspirations for other teachers but also help in framing educational policies in future.

These positive tales of success are evenly contested by difficult, nagging problems that the teachers have to lock horns with. These are problems which deal with the school's infrastructure and other facilities like absence of a required number of teachers, lesser number of classrooms, and not enough money for facilities and mid-day meal and so on continue to disrupt the studies. These issues have been under public notice for a long time and have served as subject for research and papers.

These nagging problems demand attention but some other issues that have cropped up silently in the write-ups provoke distress. The teachers point out towards a host of reasons which keep them from making the drive for regular attendance a success. They repeatedly mention seasonal migration of parents in search of jobs (with their children in company); children helping their parents with chores and of course child labour prevent the children from being regular in classes. The reasons are mostly socio-economic in nature. Some teachers believe that lack of awareness on the part of the parents stops children from being regular in school.

The State has an important part to play when it comes to finding solution for socio-economic problems that keep the children from school. In this context we can mention projects that involve 100 days work, facilitation of food security, proper functioning of ICDS and setting up of crèches at Anganwadi centres (which Tamil Nadu has successfully accomplished) so that school going children are not burdened with the task of looking after younger siblings and so on. The biggest stride to solve this problem is obviously the introduction of mid-day meal in schools. Most of the teachers agree that attendance of children has escalated dramatically after the school started serving mid-day meals. The fall in the attendance on Saturdays when the mid-day meal is not served acts as an indicator. It is evident when hunger, poverty, economic inequality acts as a reality check, measures to expand educational initiatives should be coupled with other supportive developmental activities.

Besides these, there are other problems which demand a social welfare movement. Some of the teachers feel that lack of insistence on the part of parents result in lower attendance and hence they lag behind in studies. There are others who feel unlettered or barely educated parents cannot guide their children, therefore they cannot cope up. Lack of pre schooling at home or Anganwadi are some of the other reasons that are put forward in order to justify dropping out. The teachers further complain that the parents do not turn up for meetings. Some parents go to the extent of summoning the teachers to fetch money for their daily drink. To be precise a part of teachers strongly feel only a sea change in the social and psychological world can solely serve the cause of education.

The parents' worldview is of course essential. The teachers' write-up and various surveys prove that the necessity of private tuitions has been inflated beyond proportion yet some parents

continue to believe that private tuitions would 'improve' their children's grades. Many a times the result is opposite as the child gets baffled since the tutor and the school teacher follow two very different methods while teaching. Improvement of teaching procedure seems to be the only way by which this problem can be solved. Public dialogue should also be instigated as a solution to this problem. We simply cannot overrule the fact that it is urgent to educate the children better, thus spurring the growth of private tuitions. The teachers need to accept responsibility and correct the parents about any growing distrust on the school. The teachers obviously need support from education policy regarding changes in syllabi and educational infrastructure can adequately help a teacher to pursue a better teaching method. Along with this there should be a bond of trust and empathy between the teachers and parents to make the school-going experience rewarding for the children. Some teachers expressed worry on the flourishing of private educational institutions. The same solution works here as well. If we can ensure that the Government school system has all the basic amenities and every support for children then a public discussion can solve the residual problem.

In search of future guidelines

The problems indicated by the teachers are indeed grounded in reality. But the problems are superseded by our attitudes towards them. Among the good precedents are: a) children's learning of alphabets and other studies are completed within school hours, this is how it should be; b) the relationship between parents and teachers is one of friendship and companionship; c) new pedagogical innovations; d) school's effect brings about positive cultural changes within parents, have been highlighted throughout. In Rava settlements, Santhal villages, Muslim localities and tea estates the teachers have to work against numerous odds. They derive strength to battle these difficulties and nurture their institutions with tenderness coupled with a logical outlook. The children should learn their alphabets at school, not at home. The teachers should teach them that. In fact each child is a first learner; the question of generation is totally irrelevant. The teacher needs to develop a bond of empathy with parents; a joint initiative can only be possible then. A section of the write-ups testify the truth. This will not ensure total success but inspire others to follow a road less-taken as and when the situation demands it. A parent who asks money of a teacher for his daily drink would not turn a new leaf overnight but the teacher can act as a catalyst to bring about a change by creating an awareness drive in the community to eradicate such malpractices.

Then what stops the teachers and policy makers from thinking progressively and positively? May be our policy makers rely more on handed-down codes than on modern pedagogy. Instead of bringing all children into the fold we believe in only a few succeeding in studies. It is indeed unfortunate that the teaching community, who while battling thousand odds have kept the system alive, have to face such crises. Our worn-out system should shoulder the blame since till today grades count more than logic and scientific understanding. But hope springs from the fact that a section of the teaching community has been able to pinpoint this problem and showing us the right way in which our children will find the right kind of justice.

An analysis of the teachers' write-up is in many ways an in depth review of the society as a whole. For whatever that has gone wrong we need to shoulder our share of blame. We cannot hope to grow without this bout of self analysis. We can achieve our desired end only if we take a fair share of the praise and the blame. The teachers can show us our way out.

This compilation, we hope, will create a platform for constructive exchange of ideas and the teachers will have much to contribute in this arduous journey. We hope the teachers, educationists and anybody interested in education will find it useful.

Kumar Rana

Enrolment, Attendance and Drop-out

Fifty-six year old Gurupada Majee from Purulia has reminisces about his long teaching years thus: 'There was a time when the children would not want to come to the village school at all. Later, after we reached out to the community and spoke to the parents, the students started coming to school. Recently, the infrastructure and everything else has undergone a complete makeover. Parents have become much more aware about the need for educating their children and also much more caring about their children's development'. Gurupada Majee's words are not just true for Purulia; they are also true for any district in West Bengal. From official statistics, conversations with people, and the teachers' write up that have been collected during the course of this workshop, we see a considerable progress has been made in West Bengal in the arena of public primary education. But one of the most important progresses has been the dramatic rise in rate of enrolment. The First Education Commission that was formed in the state was the Ashok Mitra Commission and according to the data provided by them, within the year 1979-1980, the GER² or Gross Enrolment Ratio for West Bengal was 87.4%³. However, the DISE – or the District Information System of Education – provides data which says that between 2008 and 2009, the average GER was 121.2%. According to the DISE of the same year, the NER was

² The GER is calculated on the basis of total number of children enrolled (irrespective of age). NER is calculated on the basis of the number of actually enrolled children in a given unit (say, a state), and the total number of school-age children in that unit. For example, if in a particular year the number of children of basic-school age (6-14 years) is 100, but the total number of enrolled children is 90, and overall cumulative enrolment is 105, then GER is $(105/100) \times 100 = 105\%$, and NER is $(90/100) \times 100 = 90\%$

³ *Report of the Education Commission, Government of West Bengal, 1992.*

99.1%⁴. A survey conducted by the Pratichi Trust in 2008 and 2009 shows that between the ages of 5 and 14, out of 1088 children, only 3 children, i.e. 0.3% could be labelled never-enrolled students⁵. From the writings that have been collected during these workshops, we see that West Bengal has achieved almost 100% rate of enrolment state-wide. A few teachers have mentioned instances of out-of-school children, and it is true that a few isolated cases still exist, but overall we can say with some certainty that West Bengal has achieved a certain degree of distinction in child enrolment at the level of primary education. However, this success can only become valuable if the children who are enrolled in school can be kept in school, and made to attend school on a regular basis. This is necessary for providing quality education to the children. But from teachers' writings, we see that they have been unable to transform the success of enrolment into the arena of children's regular school-attendance. To be fair, attendance has improved considerably from what it used to be, but teachers themselves appear to feel the improvement so far is not enough, and much remains to be done. Difficulty in accessing statistics is the primary problem that stands in the way assessing the enrolment statistics. Statistics from the government is not that comprehensive and figures procured from other sources show difference in their findings. Pratichi Trust's own survey in 2008-2009 verifies that when compared to the last, the figures from the end of this decade shows considerable improvement in school attendance. At the same time it also shows that overall, the rate of absence in primary schools has remained somewhere in the vicinity of 25.2%⁶. So the question of daily attendance and what impedes or encourages it remains a very important question. This issue needs to be analysed through the prism of both the teachers' own experiences and our observations.

About dropouts, we have seen that government statistics, surveys conducted by private bodies and teachers' opinion of dropout show a certain amount of parity. According to the Sarva Shiksha Mission's data, in 2007-2008, at the primary school level the number of dropouts in West Bengal was 6.9%⁷. Although Raghavendra Chattopadhyay and others (1998) say that the

⁴ *Annual Report 2008-09*, Department of School Education, Government of West Bengal, Kolkata.

⁵ Pratichi Education Report 2, Pratichi (India) Trust, Delhi and Kolkata, 2009-10.

⁶ According to Pratichi's survey, the rate of attendance in primary schools was 58% in 2001-02. In 2008-09, this had become 74.8%. For details, see the *Pratichi Education Report 2*.

⁷ *Annual Report 2008-09*, Department of School Education, Government of West Bengal, Kolkata.

actual number of children who have dropped out is less than the government statistics provided⁸. According to Pratiche Trust's 2008-09 survey, children who drop out of primary school before completing the entire primary education phase is 0.6%⁹ of all children, i.e. according to the Pratiche survey, most children who enrol in primary schools remain in the education system at least until they complete their primary education. The teachers also concur with this phenomenon. Bidhayak Dutta, who is a teacher at Purulia's Maanpur Primary School says, 'Our efforts have not gone in vain. Today in my area, dropouts and over-aged never-enrolled students are practically non-existent'. Although some teachers have offered the opinion that no matter how little, the problem of dropout students cannot be ignored, most teachers attending the workshop have chosen to focus on children who are enrolled but do not come to school regularly, i.e., the problem of low attendance. In the next subsections we will discuss the matters of enrolment; attendance and dropout with the help of the teachers' write ups in greater detail.

Enrolment

Of the 348 teachers who attended the workshops, about 59 people, i.e. 17% have discussed the matter of enrolment in various contexts. As discussed earlier most of them feel that the problem of enrolment has been eradicated almost completely. A large section of them have focused on a host of other issues. About 20 of the 59 teachers have said that private schools are responsible for dropouts and lower enrolments in their own schools. Some other teachers have said that Sishu Shikha Kendras – or SSKs – which have been established close to schools have harmed enrolment and attendance in those school, as a section of the students have been diverted to the SSKs. Some people have also opined that lower birth rates in the state or in the area have resulted in lower enrolment. On the other hand, some teachers have reported an over-enrolment of students in their school, despite lack of infrastructure to handle such numbers. These incidents

⁸ According to Raghavendra Chattopadhyay and his colleagues, the enrolment data for Class 1 as sent by teachers is flawed, as is the process by the number of drop-out students are counted. As a result, government statistics do not align with reality. For more details see *The Status of Primary Education in West Bengal*, Chattopadhyay, Raghavendra and others, IIM Calcutta, 1998 (manuscript). One of the reasons for Class 1 recording a large number of drop-outs is because during enrolment, several children who are, age-wise, meant to be in pre-primary level institutions. They remain two years in the same class, but since the law does not accommodate this situation, they are counted as students who have dropped out.

⁹ *Pratiche Education Report 2*, Pratiche (India) Trust, Delhi and Kolkata, 2009-10.

have mainly come to us from Jalpaiguri and Purulia, which are areas with relatively low density of population. Pinky Rajak, who is a teacher at the Hindi-medium Shastri Hindi Sishu Niketan in Jalpaiguri, mentions that the number of students at her school is 560, making the pupil-teacher ratio (PTR) a rather imbalanced 80:1.

A few teachers have also discussed the matter of continuous enrolment throughout the length of the year. According to them, this is a problem, and enrolment should be completed towards the beginning of the academic year. Others have pointed out that the lack of birth certificates in many cases becomes an impediment to enrolling a child, or determining the child's exact age. Samarendranath Biswas from Purulia, for example, has said that, 'Currently the lowest age of enrolment is 5+. However from my long experience of teaching, I can say that it would be better if children were enrolled at 6+'. The opinion is important, especially since the RTE Act also specifies 6+ as the age of enrolment for children. Other teachers have spoken about the problem of enrolling one child at multiple institutions. Susanta Sarkar, who is a teacher at Pakuahaat Primary School at Maldah, writes :

After I have joined this particular school, I have noticed that a few children do not come to school regularly. So I marked these children down. After that, when I went and spoke to their parents I discovered something strange. Since classes at my school are held in the morning throughout the academic year, some parents have enrolled their children both at my school and at the SSK which is next to my school, or at a primary school which stays open for the afternoon session. The classes there begin at 11AM. So those children come to my school three or four times a week. On the other days they go to those other institutions. After I came to know of this, I spoke to the parents and I tried to make them understand that this is quite harmful for your child. The child will not be able to learn anything from any of the institutions that they are currently enrolled in. After this explanation, from the next academic year the children who wanted to stay at my school dropped out from the other institutions and as a result long absenteeism has been greatly reduced in my school.

From this particular write-up, we see a problem but we also see a very important solution to problems. We notice that building a relationship with parents or guardians or the local community helps solve a lot of problems that otherwise appear unsolvable. Therefore community outreach is very important for the development of primary education. Now we might wish to

analyse the reasons behind this almost 100% success in enrolling children in schools. From the teachers' writings we see that a very big part of this success goes to teacher's individual efforts. Maldah's N.G. Haatidubi Primary School's teacher Abinash Biswas writes that when he first joined the school in 2001, the number of enrolled students were only 47. It is due to his sincere efforts that within one week of his joining, 60 more students came and joined the school. In his own words:

According to the attendance register, the number of enrolled children in the school was 47. On an average, about 13 students used to come every day. Children from three small villages used to come to this school. I went around those three villages, collected a lot of data. In different ways, I spoke to the people of the village and the children and emphasised the importance of an education. Slowly I could see that I had kindled an interest about the subject in them. Within one week, in just Class I, 60 new students enrolled. The overall number of enrolled students went up to 171. I would especially like to mention the case of one woman whose eight children all came and enrolled at the school together. Before this, none of the children had ever been to school.

But a system cannot count on individual efforts of teachers to perform better consistently. Along with goodwill and personal efforts, what is required is well-organised administrative infrastructure. The results that encouraging teachers to perform better can achieve coupled with better infrastructure can be demonstrated from the writings of Jayanta Barman, who is a teacher at Roophata Primary School in South Dinajpur. He writes :

When I first joined the school, about 15 to 20 students came to school every day. There was just one classroom for all of them. Within three months of my joining, the head teacher was transferred to another school. As a result, it became a single-teacher school, me being the single teacher. Teaching was very difficult at that point. Often I lost all motivation for work. In 2001, three new teachers joined the school. Their presence renewed my interest in my work. Children were also enthusiastic about having one dedicated teacher per class. I then started going around to every house in the village and collecting children to bring to school. Upon hearing of the positive changes, the people from the village also started sending their children to school more regularly. That very year, we had 90 new students enrolling in the school.

Jayanta Barman's experience makes it clear how big a role improved infrastructure plays not only in encouraging teachers who may have lost hopes of fulfilling their duties, but it also shows what role improved infrastructure can play in greater enrolment and attendance in our schools. The success of West Bengal in near universal enrolment is the combined effort of teachers, parents and the reification of government policies. Irrespective of whether they come from an urban settlement, from upper castes, from tribal communities or from social minorities, it has now almost become a rule of the parents that they will keep track of their children's age and send them to the closest available school once their children are of school-going age, which is why, we see Biswaroop Sarkar from Maldah write, Parents no longer have to be coerced and cajoled into sending their children to the schools.

Private schools

It is quite worrying, the opinions that have come up about private schools / educational institutions from the various workshops that we conducted. 34% of all teachers who discussed the matter of enrolment have said that parents tendency towards enrolling their children in private schools instead of state schools is the chief reason why enrolment in state schools has gone down. Of course, opinions differ amongst teachers, but most teachers agree that the presence of primary education facility in private schools prevent local children from attending public schools. Amrit Barman, who teaches at Coochbehar's Chhat Jorpatki Special Cadre Primary School, says:

Every year the total number of students in my school exceeds 300, even though I was the only teacher at this school. Once, those students who came from well-to-do families were taken out of my school and put into private schools because their parents thought a single-teacher school could not provide their children with the sort of education that they need. At the end of the academic year, however, they realised that despite teaching all classes myself, the amount that I could manage to teach each class was still more than what the private schools taught their children, so for the next year the children came back to my school. There are quite a few students who have thus returned to the fold.

Of course it is a great success for Amrit Barman that he had lost his students to a competing institution and then won them back, but personal effort can never replace administrative commitment to providing better infrastructure, so that the public schools can accommodate all the students who wish to enrol in them. Other teachers have pointed out that the tendency to enrol children in private schools demonstrates biases or prejudices that are present in parents. The external attractions of private schools, such as new uniform, a carpool or a van which collects students from their homes and delivers them to the school etc. add to a private institution's attractiveness. However, teachers also concur that this attraction mostly appeals to relatively well-off families who can respond to it by taking their children to private schools. Our experience is different; we have seen that even families who cannot afford the high tuition fee of private schools are beginning to send their children there, despite the additional strain it puts upon them. Somehow, in the minds of parents, the glamour of uniform and dedicated transportation etc. appears to indicate higher quality of education, but this is not always the case. The debate should not be focused on whether private schools are better than public schools (or vice versa). The main focus of the conversation should be which school teaches children better, and how they go about doing this. It is very good news therefore, that teachers like Amrit Barman fulfil their duty to such a remarkable extent that children who once left, came back to his school.

Attendance

According to a survey conducted by the Pratichi Trust in 2001-2002, we see that the rate of attendance at primary schools was 58%. In the survey conducted by the Trust in 2008-09, this had increased to 74.8%. That there has definitely been a progress in school attendance is beyond the scope of debate. The contribution of the Mid-Day Meal programme in increasing this rate has also been widely acknowledged. In another survey conducted by the Pratichi Trust in 2004, we see that after the Mid-Day Meal programme was started in West Bengal, the attendance of school children increased by more than 10%.¹⁰ This fact has also been reflected in the writings of the teachers. Of all the teachers who attended the workshop, 44% spoke about student attendance.

¹⁰ For details see, Pratichi (India) Trust Report: The Impact of the Mid-day Meal Programme in West Bengal, 2005, 2005, www.righttofoodindia.org

Amongst them 49 teachers, which is 32% of the whole have said that the Mid-Day Meal programme is primarily responsible for this increase. However amongst those who discussed the problem of a continuing gap between enrolment and attendance, most have chosen to focus on the problems that create this situation instead of discussing methods by which they have managed to ameliorate it. Only about 23 teachers have recorded how they, by virtue of their own personal or individual attempts, have managed to partially overcome the matter of very low attendance in their schools. Amongst the former group, we can consider the write-up of Sudipto Indra, who is a teacher at Jalpaiguri's Basusuba BFB School:

My school is located in a remote rural area and almost every child attending the school comes from very poor backgrounds. Most of the time, they come to the school without eating anything or eating only a fistful of food. This directly affected their capability of learning. They would be irregular at school, and even when they did come to class, they would be inattentive. Later the Mid-Day Meal solved this to a certain extent, but I must say attendance remains very poor on Saturdays because on Saturdays there is no Mid-Day Meal. If for example, we assume that between Monday and Friday there are 100 students who come to school on an average, then on Saturday we see that attendance drops to no more than 10 to 20 students.

But later in the write-up we come to know that after they began organising various cultural functions in school on Saturdays, the teachers were able to attract students to school on those days. Attendance on Saturdays has since become more regular.

On the matter of personal efforts to increase daily attendance, we have a valuable insight from the writing of Mohammad Hefjur Rahaman, who is teacher in Maldahh :

Hasanujjman is a student of Class III in my school, quite an irregular boy. If I ask him why he doesn't come to school regularly, he says he has to go out to collect mango leaves for fuel at home or he has to take his father's lunch to the fields, and so on and so forth. I went home one day to speak to the boy's mother. The mother said that I want to send my son on household chores, but he refuses to do them. A mother from the neighbouring household also agreed and said that Hasanujjman does not actually do the chores that are assigned to him. Hasanujjman was not alone; there were several other children who were as irregular as he is. At first I thought, well there is no solution to this. In this poor society, the biggest roadblock to children's coming to school is poverty. Perhaps talking to the mothers as a group might solve the problem somewhat. I called a meeting. Most of the

mothers came. We had a long discussion about the ways in which the mothers could contribute to a more regular educational environment in their child's lives. The reaction was unbelievable. Seeing their interest, I assigned certain supervisory responsibilities to a few mothers in each neighbourhood. The success exceeded even my own expectations.

Similarly, a teacher from North Dinajpur writes:

When I first started teaching in 2003, I was assigned to Class 3. Nearly 70% of my students could not even write their own names. When I spoke to the head teacher, he said that when they came to the school, there were just 3 teachers. One of them never came to school, and the other was busy with other things. The remaining two of them who were in school could not manage all these students. Besides, many of the students frequently went to Delhi or Mumbai for two or three months to work. So even if they started teaching them, it did not build up to a long-term, cumulative good. I could not accept the head-teacher's words and let matters stay as they were. Instead, I started visiting each home in the village. I introduced myself to the parents, I spoke to them, I came to know about their household conditions, and finally I ended my visits with requests of sending their children to school. Gradually, during various problems in the village, villagers started to come to me for discussion, advice and solution. After almost three months of going from door-to-door, getting involved in problems of the villagers, taking ill or injured individuals to the hospital, solving their problems with the police and so on, finally I was able to change people's attitude towards education. People were actually surprised that an outsider would come to their neighbourhood, go from door-to-door and take an interest in their affairs, not for any personal or political gain, but merely to make sure that their children went to school. As a result, the moment I step into the village, I can hear people telling each other, 'The new master has come'. I could hear parents shouting indoors to their children, 'The master is here. Run! Run to school!' Within two months of this change in attitude, the average attendance of students was pushed up to 200-220 per day.

As commendable as these personal efforts are, we have also been able to surmise that certain teachers are indifferent towards their social responsibilities as teachers. Therefore it is very important that we devise a way in which improvement in school attendance is not dependent purely on a teacher's own enterprise. There are certain mechanisms which encourage children to come to school, for example, teachers who make an attempt to speak their local language or

dialect, teachers who make sure games and sports are part of the academic curricula and so on. For example, Uttam Kumar Majhi, who's from Purulia, writes that:

When I first joined the school, the number of students was 247. Usually, only half of this number came to school regularly. The reason was just one, the lack of adequate number of teachers. Studying was not a properly regulated process. However later, the number of teachers increased to three, and slowly the students started coming back to school. Finally, when the school boasted of four teachers, regular attendance rose to almost 84% every day.

But an important thing to note here is that there was not a single teacher in our workshops who wrote that attendance was not a problem in his or her school. Even if 95% of students attended school regularly, attendance could still be perceived as a problem. We see this in the writing of Jhontu Pramanik, who is a teacher in the South 24 Parganas. He writes, 'Currently, 95% of the children enrolled in my school come to my school regularly. However, even if there is some very small social ceremony or event in the neighbourhood, attendance dips'. That there is an actual anxiety about attendance despite an already healthy attendance rate is, we think, a positive indicator: a teacher, despite having an almost full class, is still concerned about the few students who are missing lessons that day. This is definitely a sign of progress.

But it's one thing to be anxious about the poor attendance of even a few students and another to turn that anxiety to a desire to bring about positive change. The primary tendency that we notice from teachers' writings is that in most schools, the problem of attendance lies somewhere in the middle. There are no schools with 100% attendance, neither are there schools with attendances so shockingly low as to warrant immediate intervention. As a result, there is a certain laxity, perhaps, in teachers' attitudes towards putting in an effort to improve attendance. However they themselves admit that lack of regular attendance is bound to affect the education process negatively. Head-teacher Sudhangshu Bhattacharya from Purulia writes:

Our first problem is irregular attendance of children. I will give you a small example to demonstrate how the children's irregularity impedes lessons. In Class 3, I discussed Swami Vivekananda's childhood in two paragraphs. The next day I discussed it again. I saw that of my 35 students in Class 3, only 25 were present that day, and the next day, again only 25 students were present. But seven students, who were present the first day, were absent the second day, and naturally to compensate for this, seven students who were

present the second day were not present the first day. As a result, for 14 students out of 25, the lesson that I completed in two days was an incomplete lesson. This lack of continuity is especially acute in the case of maths. If students are not present every day, they end up not grasping any part of the lesson at all.

Explaining children's absence from school, Coochbehar's Matigara A.P. school teacher, Ananta Modak writes, 'My school is in the middle of a region where tobacco is one of the primary cultivated crops. So at crucial points during the cultivation of tobacco, children drop out of school or attend school very irregularly. When I go talk to their parents about it, they very clearly tell me that they have no option but to ask for their children's help in the agricultural processes. Jalpaiguri's teacher Soumyajit Basu writes, 'Often children bring their younger siblings to school. The children are busy looking after younger siblings as in school hours. As a result, their attention remains less on what is being taught in the classroom and much more on their siblings... If we ask the children not to bring their siblings along till the siblings themselves are of school-going age, then most of these children stop coming to school altogether, because looking after their siblings is much more important to them than acquiring an education'.

A large section of teachers overall have opined that the responsibility of children's regular attendance rests finally with the parents, and if they are irregular, then this is a parental failure. Some of them have also explained that the nature of the parents' occupation is such that they cannot fulfil the responsibility of making sure that their children are going to school every day and on time, whereas others have said that it is the parents' lack of awareness of the importance of education that impedes their children's attendance. Especially in the instances where we have found that children are involved in financial processes such as agricultural labour, etc. or in domestic processes, such as looking after siblings and so on, teachers have blamed parents for their lack of awareness about childhood development. However, there are a few teachers who are more sympathetic towards the parents, and they have not blamed the parents despite having students from families who engage them in profitable ventures or in domestic labour. For example, six teachers from the Baharampur workshop have said that their students often absent themselves to fulfil domestic chores, but of them only three have blamed the students' parents for this turn of events. Now despite this diversity of opinion about parental role, the fact that a large section of teachers actually blame parents' lack of awareness about the importance of

education makes this an important matter for discussion. We must ask ourselves that is it true that a large chunk of parents in West Bengal do not care about their children acquiring an education, or is it because these parents cannot afford to ensure that their children drop all other responsibilities to come to school regularly.

Moloy Banerjee, who teaches at Bataigol Tea Garden Primary School, says

My students don't come to school regularly. I spoke to parents about this and I even called a mothers meeting. At the meeting, I asked them, why don't you send your children to school regularly? As a result, the mother told me that every morning they have to reach their place of work before seven, and can only come back home at around 3:30/4. As a result, they cannot be physically around to ensure that their children go to school on time, or come back on time. They told me that the only way their children's attendance can be ensured if the teacher comes to their home every day and takes the children along with him or her to school. Now this is impossible to do.

It is important that the mothers' opinion be considered carefully, because we notice from many of the teachers' writings that childcare, or even being with the child for large chunks during the day, becomes professionally impossible for most parents. So if a permanent solution is not found for this, then the hope of regulating school attendance for children from such families will remain a distant dream. In this matter, we must also briefly mention the matter of parents who migrate seasonally in search of work. Teachers from Purulia and Coochbehar especially have mentioned this matter often. 40% of teachers from Purulia who have spoken about the attendance of children and 29% of teachers from Coochbehar have said that a very large percentage of the parents of their students migrate seasonally and most of them take their young children along, which is to say, the children who come to primary schools, have to absent themselves for long periods every academic year because they travel with their migratory parents. One teacher from Coochbehar has suggested that there should be someone in a village with whom the children can stay when the parents migrate. In fact he says that this is what happens in his village. He had requested children's families to leave them behind with a local guardian. They did so, ensuring that the children could come to school regularly even when their parents were away. However, although he was personally successful, this cannot be prescribed for every single school in every single area with seasonally migratory population. A teacher from Purulia has proposed that residential schools be set up for children like these. Perhaps these are solutions which should be

discussed at greater length and implemented. As is apparent from the above discussion, child labour is one of the major causes of long-term and short-term absenteeism. About 13 teachers have explicitly mentioned the word child-labour, but the phenomenon is present in the writings of more teachers. Jalpaiguri's Shyamaprasad R.R. Primary School's teacher Sandip Pal says that this problem is particularly prominent amongst the young girls who come to his school. He said that 'Most of my female students work as domestic helps in the better-off families. Therefore most of them come to school very irregularly'. Going deeper into the problem, many of these teachers have said that the poor socio-economic status of the families of these children is what results in the necessity for child labour and therefore in the children's absenteeism. Deepak Kumar Roy, who is a teacher in Murshidabad writes,

My school is located in an area that is settled with people from the minority community. During the first few weeks of every academic year, when children are being enrolled, there's an enormous rush and even competition among parents about who can enrol their child first at what school. However, after that phase one notices the enthusiasm dying away, and absenteeism rises. If you look for the reason for this absenteeism, you will find that the socio-economic condition of the family is the chief reason. Most of the people from the minority community in that area work as agricultural labourers and because of persistent poverty, their children have to be involved in money-making endeavours from a very young age.

Certain matters which are very important in their influence on irregular attendance but which have been mentioned by very few people are matters of language. For example, Jalpaiguri's Prahlad Das, who teaches at Paschim Parang's Khasiamari Primary School, writes:

Students from many different backgrounds come to my school. There are students who come from families where Bengali is not spoken. Their mother tongue is not Bengali, Mastering Bengali becomes a big problem for them. As a result, they cannot follow what is being taught in the class. After this comes English, which is a huge burden. So as a result, as time goes by, the absenteeism increases amongst these children.

Dhee Ganguly, who's also from Jalpaiguri, cites illness as another reason for absenteeism. He says, 'Undernourishment is a big problem in my school. Most of my students are very thin. Their eyes have lost the sparkle, their faces look worn. They live in very unhygienic environment, and as a result they constantly suffer from some digestive problem or another. As a result, their

attendance at school drops.’ Teachers from Maldahh and Murshidabad especially have also spoken about the problem of commuting to school, especially during monsoons. One teacher from Purulia has also said that insufficient teachers is a big reason for absenteeism. If there are not sufficient teachers to take care of the children adequately, then children lose interest and stop coming to school. Dasrath Mandi, who’s also from Purulia says

The school that I teach at is located between three different neighbourhoods and in between the school and the neighbourhoods is an empty field. The distance between these three neighbourhoods and the school is almost three kilometers. So for the children to walk to the school through that empty field is quite difficult, both in summer and in monsoon. As a result, the children become very irregular between these seasons and it would therefore be good if an SSK could be established within the neighbourhoods themselves.

Subimal Ghosh, who is from Murshidabad, writes

After enrolling themselves in Class I, we see towards the beginning that many children do not want to come to school, and their parents also don’t want to send them to school. As reasons, we later discover that children, who have never left home before this, are acutely uncomfortable in a new environment with many new children and adults who are strangers. They feel alienated and lost, and secondly, a lot of parents have told me that children at such a young age are quite weak. They cannot undertake the commute on foot to the schools which tend to be a little far away from their home and so they think that enrolment is enough for the time being. Let the children grow up and become a little stronger. Then they can then start attending school regularly.

On the other hand, we have also had teachers who say the reverse, that after the Mid-Day Meal programme started, parents have not only begun to send their children of school-going age to school regularly, they have also started sending younger children so that the children can be fed at school. The themes that come out from these writing are, a) socio-economic conditions that forces children off the education track, b) socio-linguistic diversity which puts children who do not speak the majority language at a disadvantage, c) malnourishment and lack of healthcare and d) lack of proper road infrastructure which prevents children from coming to school regularly. Now, till these matters are addressed at the roots, the problem of irregular school attendance can

never be solved completely and therefore it is high time along with education oriented policies, policies about child health and nutrition and so on also be taken into consideration.

Dropping-out

Thirty-two teachers have discussed the matter of children dropping out of school. Amongst them seven teachers have commented on how the rate of dropout has decreased. Dulal Chand Naskar, who is from the South 24 Parganas, writes that, 'Currently, in an attempt to bring all children within the schoolyard, the Mid-Day Meal programme has been started. As a result, the tendency to come to school has increased to a great extent and the number of children dropping out has also gone down considerably'. Jalpaiguri's Manoj Kumar Mandal writes on the matter of keeping children in school, 'In the old way of teaching, the number of dropouts used to increase gradually. However using the new methods, we find that it is easier to retain children in school and reduce the number of dropouts.' Overall because of the relatively fewer number of teachers who have discussed the matter of children actually dropping out of school we do not have too many personal experiences to mine from. However, many teachers who have spoken about irregular attendance have mentioned that irregular attendance in some cases finally results in the child dropping out. Looking for the reasons of the absenteeism-resulting-in-dropouts phenomenon, teachers have blamed parents' lack of awareness. Others have also mentioned child labour as being the primary cause. Ira Mandal, who also teaches in the South 24 Parganas, in the Shibaniipur Abaitanik Primary School, writes:

My school is located 15 minutes from the river. During the monsoons, the children go to the river to catch 'meen' or fish eggs. Some of them work on zardozi borders for sarees in the morning and then come to school. Maybe a relatively affluent child's father has a business of delivering paddy or rice, and this child begins helping his or her father in the trade very early on. Now as a result of these other engagements, the children come to school very irregularly, and amongst them, on an average I would say about 5% eventually end up as dropouts.

Murshidabad's teachers are the ones who have discussed the matter of children dropping out because of child labour the most. From this we assume that the problem is particularly acute in this district. When talking specifically about girls, several teachers have mentioned that early marriage is one of the prime reasons for girls dropping out of primary school. Mainly teachers from Purulia, along with two other districts have mentioned children's participation in migratory labour as a reason for dropping out. However we noticed with some interest that no teacher from Coochbehar has mentioned this particular reason for dropout although many of them have mentioned children's participation in migratory labour as a reason for children's long absenteeism in this district. A different mother tongue is another reason why many students eventually dropout of the school system, and amongst others, Murshidabad's Krishnendu Ghosh talks about this. He writes:

Sritam Soren is a Santhali boy. If he comes to school regularly, then the books he has to look at, he knows are not written in his own language. These books speak of a lifestyle which is not his lifestyle. However, these are the books that he is forced to read, this is the language that he has to study putting aside his own mother tongue. As days go by, this alienation gradually increases and eventually this alienation from the language and the content of the textbooks detaches Sritam from the entire school. He stops participating in the class, he stops having friends because most of the other boys speak Bengali. Finally he stops paying attention to the teacher, pushing all advice of continuing his education aside moves away from the school. Sritam, from becoming a friendless social dropout in the classroom, finally becomes a school dropout as well.

However, despite taking into account these tragic exclusionary incidents, we must concede that the problem of dropouts is not at the same level as the problem of irregular attendance. Dropout becomes a bigger problem as one moves to from primary to secondary school, but it is at the same time true that even if a few children drop out of the education system, an effort must be made to find out why they do so, and enable them to come back to the fold. Murshidabad's Talibpur Upper Primary School's teacher Subimal Ghosh writes that in 2009-10, two children called Naim Sheikh and Haseena Khatun stopped coming to school after passing Class 4. Both children were very good at their studies. Upon enquiring, Subimal found out that Naim has started working with a construction crew as an apprentice, and Haseena has started making 'bidis', or locally hand-rolled cigarettes, with her mother.

Then suddenly one day I met Naim on the street and he said, ‘Sir, will you give me a Class 5 English textbook?’ I said, ‘What are you going to do with that book?’ He said, ‘I am going to read it.’ I said that, ‘Well, if you wanted to study, why didn’t you stay in school?’ He said, ‘My father suffers from tuberculosis. My family has to arrange for my elder sister’s wedding and my younger brother’s education. That is why I started training here, so that I can go to Kerala and make more money. Tell me, how can I afford to go to school?’ I stood there. I could not answer his question.

There are instances however, where teachers, appalled by the conditions their former students have to go through after they drop out, have intervened, spoken to parents and members of the local community and succeeded in improving their students’ lives. One of the achievements of this process has been cancelling child marriages for a few female students. Overall, one must say that the introduction of the Mid-Day Meal programme – which addresses undernourishment resulting from poverty and the socio-economic backwardness that most students’ families suffer from – is in the teachers’ opinion the chief contributing factor towards attracting children to the schools.

One thing that is visible from the many examples in the various subsections of this chapter is that for enrolling all school-age children, ensuring regular attendance, and prevention of dropout, the joint effort between teachers and parents, and also members of the local community, is very important. In the following chapters, we will explore this underlying theme in the light of various other matters which have also come up in the teachers’ write-ups.

Our Schools and All Our Children

Discussions about schools are inevitably also conversations about the society they exist within, and the communities they serve (or fail to).

Not all children in the same school come from the same social backgrounds. Some come from comfortably-off families, who have had – amongst other advantages – the financial and social capital required to acquire an education. They are capable of imparting the basics of an education to their children much before they reach the school-going age. Other students, however, come from diametrically opposite situations: impoverished families, working nearly every waking hour for the most meagre forms of survival. Naturally, the differences in environments influence the capabilities of these children. In the 345 narratives that have emerged from our writing workshops, the matter of children and their diversity have come up, again and again, in different guises. In this chapter, we have collated such views under the most frequently-occurring heads.

Difference in Socioeconomic Contexts

One of the most frequent laments about our public school students is that they come from painfully impoverished families. Their parents' work, as is locally said, 'udoyasto' – from dawn to dusk. Yet such exhaustive labour is not enough to sustain the family. In such situations,

children frequently miss school, or drop out altogether and attempt to find work locally or in neighbouring areas. The previous chapter has detailed such lives, and their influence on the development of the child. Many teachers, however, have focused on the difference in academic capability between such children, and those that can afford stay at home and not worry about earning a livelihood this young. One such teacher is Giasuddin Mondal, of Haridoba Notunpara Primary School, Murshidabad.

Children who come to school from urban areas show familiarity with alphabets even before they start attending classes, because they learn this at home. They don't have to be taught the letters, they don't have to be taught how to hold a pen properly, they don't have to be taught which way is the right side up for notebooks. But in village schools like ours, children have no idea what alphabets are, neither are they comfortable with objects like pens. In mixed classrooms, it is impossible for them to keep up with children who have learnt the basics at home. As classes advance, only those that have come to school knowing something learn more, and those that came without knowing anything keep dropping further and further back. By the government's directive, we cannot keep these children in the same class, so they move to the next without having learnt anything. As a result, the number of 'backward students' increases by the day.

What we can gather from Giasuddin Mondal's words is that the fragmented implementation of the 'no-detention policy' has created a bigger problem than it sought to solve. Introducing the policy without strengthening the base of our elementary education has resulted in pushing unprepared children through the system and out of it, without them having learnt what the system was meant to impart in them. As a possible solution, Mondal suggests a pre-primary section. In his words, 'If children are admitted to Class One without at least a familiarity with the alphabets, then several teaching hours have to be spent merely introducing them to it. As a result, chunks of *Kisholoy I* [the prescribed textbook for Class 1] remain unfinished even as children move to the next class and are handed *Kisholoy II*. This creates a fear of books in the weaker children, a fear of being proved incapable in classes.'

This isn't Giasuddin's opinion alone. He has several supporters. 'Students face massive roadblocks in learning alphabets, recognising syllables and constructing sentences', said Gopal Shah, teacher at Manasapukur Free Primary School, South 24 Paraganas. Baikuntha Mallick, of Gopinathpur Dhipidanga Primary School in Murshidabad, echoes his concerns. 'One of the main

problems in the classroom is the difference in quality of students. The problem is particularly acute in Maths. I can't hurry the learning of backward students. On the other hand, I can't have the advanced learners sitting idle either. To cater to both groups at the same time is quite difficult'.

Other teachers have mentioned related problems – the inability to write their own names in the child-evaluation sheet, difficulty in reading, and so on. But what is important is that a section of teachers are attempting to solve this problem in their own way, and not merely pointing it out. Barun Majumdar, teaching at Petbhata Sheoraguri A. P. School in Coochbehar, asks students of Class 2 to make, and say aloud, words with an increasing number of letters -- two, three, four. They also practise writing the numbers 1 - 100. According to him, this helps the children identify each letter of the alphabet and their sounds, and also improves their writing. 'Not only have I had considerable success in teaching the children', Majumdar says, 'but the children have learned how to write well enough to spot their own mistakes and correct them'.

The matter of 'first generation learners' was discussed almost universally, and at some length. Purulia's Kulbahal Jogda Satsang Lower Basic School's teacher Arun Chandra Mahato feels 'There's no trouble with children who come from educated families, because their family teaches them to speak, to recite rhymes and so on. The difficulties all lie with children from the uneducated, undeveloped classes, the first generation of students in their families'.

Bibhash Mondal, from Murshidabad's Charpirojpur Primary School agrees with him. 'In my school,' he has written, 'most students are first-generation students. These six- or seven-year olds come to school without any awareness of the alphabets, because there isn't an environment of learning in their homes. So even if we put books in their hands, they're not capable of reading them. We first have to go through the process of teaching them the alphabets, before they can make use of those books'.

These teachers' feeling of helplessness or frustration is acute, because they have to teach a class of children who are at different levels of the learning curve, all the while worrying about meeting that dreaded academic deadline, 'finishing the syllabus'. However, despite being sympathetic with their concerns, one must point out that it is perfectly normal for children enrolled in Class 1

to be 'illiterate'. This is not the mark of a 'first learner'. All children, after all, are first learners. The fact that some of them have the advantage of learning certain things at home should not normalise that expectation for all children. The point of coming to school, after all, is to learn how to read and write, not to know it beforehand. It is because of this that Class 1 begins with *Bornoporichoy*, the book of Bengali alphabets. It is the teachers' responsibility to acquaint them with it in the right way. This is exactly what Barun Majumdar of Coochbehar has done. Similar achievements have been reported by Uttam Saha, teacher at Coochbehar's Indranarayan Government School: 'At our remote corner of Coochbehar, where nearly 90% of all students are 'first generation' learners, there is a school magazine. A printed school magazine', he declares with justifiable pride. After all, the magazine is the fruit of his personal efforts. He used to sit down with the children after lessons were over, teaching them poems, and how to make words and sentences through story-telling. Rubia Pal, who teaches at Panchgachhi Free Primary School in the South 24 Paraganas has also emphasised the need for writing practice for the students. But she has also confessed that this is easier said than done. 'Just the other day', she writes, "Joy told me, "Miss you make us write a lot, I won't write any more today"". So, she concludes, teachers cannot always 'make' students do what is good for them. They have to follow their wishes and desires too.

Difference in social contexts

There is immense social and economic diversity in our state. The cross-section of these creates local cultures or domestic environments which affect child development deeply. A teacher from South 24 Paraganas writes:

A lot of my students tell me that their parents have told them, 'Go ask your teacher for money to groom you, and then we'll send you to school dressed neatly'. Their problem is not poverty – they spend enough money on gambling, drinking, watching films, buying harmful things, but they are indifferent to expenses that can keep them healthy.

Ranjit Sutradhar from Coochbehar faces even greater problems: “It is unbelievable but true that almost 70% of these young children use home-brewed alcohol. The children themselves have admitted this to me quite shamelessly”. Other teachers have complained that children go to gambling dens or cinema halls instead of coming to school. Prasenjit Biswas from TaSarvala Free School has even reported that local organised violence has been influencing his students. Ananta Modak from Jatigachha AP School, Coochbehar, mentions that amongst his poor, labouring-family students from the Bangladesh border-region, high levels of superstitious belief exists, including belief in spells and charms. These complaints are not wide-spread, but are still nonetheless worrisome. These are primary school children; if they pick up destructive habits, does society have no role in preventing them? Some teachers have been able to wean students off bad habits by their own personal efforts – these efforts should be highlighted so that other adults can be encouraged by them to act similarly.

Even if one discounts these exceptional localised incidents, teachers have emphasised over and over again how influential a student’s life beyond the school is on his classroom-hours. A teacher from Maldahh sent us the following:

After showing them how to write 1 – 10 and 11 – 20, I noticed that the students draw the lines from right to left. But while teaching we always draw it from left to right. Upon enquiry I discovered that it is a habit they carry over from their Arabic lessons at the mosque in the morning. This problem takes a more serious form in Classes 1 and 2.

A teacher from Coochbehar complains that while he travels 12 kilometres to reach school by ten-thirty in the morning, his students only begin to bathe and get ready after they see him waiting for them on a red chair in the school’s verandah, and finally begin to turn up around eleven. Tithi Sarkar, who teaches at Bajarpur Primary School in South Dinajpur, says that most students of public primary schools stay in touch with their books only as long as they are in school. Education is like a forced-upon burden for them. Many other teachers have supported this assertion, and have said that the lack of an environment of learning at their homes makes these children forget whatever they have learnt at school. Playing, looking after their siblings, and

helping their families in the field keep them far too busy. As a result, a fear about books and schools slowly take root in them.

Why do these things happen? How do differences in class become cultural differences? Is it deserved, the blame that teachers thus assign to parents? Can we deny that these children are compelled by social structure to lead the lives they do?

Differences Due to Social Identity

A few teachers have commented on the difference a student's religious or ethnic origin makes to his or her academic performance. Shibshankar Baag from Abhirampur Free Primary School in the South 24 Paraganas writes:

Most Hindu families of the village are comfortably off, but the Muslim community is backward. From the very first day I noticed that although all Hindu students had been enrolled, Muslim students were either absent or had not yet been enrolled.

Mohd. Safikujjaman, who teaches at East Najipur Primary School, Murshidabad, agrees: 'Minority Muslim students are considerably behind others in the area of education. Comparatively, children from other communities are much more interested and are far more active in the classroom'.

If we look at the matter overall, we find no easy solution to these problems. An apparently simple matter of inattentive or low-achieving children becomes complex with the introduction of the children's caste, gender, religion or ethnicity. The teachers' observations are probably accurate, but precisely because the matter of social identity becomes embroiled in the question of classroom performance, the patterns must be studied carefully to see if they are widespread, and what greater social conditions might be causing them.

Of course, we have also had positive reports, mainly about the performance of young girls. Coochbehar's Ananta Modak says that in his school, there are almost an equal number of boys and girls. The girls have not fallen behind in any regard. They have shown as much capacity for

games and sports as they have for lessons. All the teachers need to do is to encourage them. Krishnendu Roy from North Dinajpur's Dulhar Primary School has even said that in his class, the rate of attendance of girls is higher than the rate of attendance of boys.

Poverty, social marginalisation and other aspects of one's social identity often becomes automatically associated with low achievement. However, it is also true that the deprived conditions in which children from such families grow up often prevent them from doing well. It is necessary to point out how social identity can lead to such deprivation, but while so doing, we must be careful not to associate the under-achievement of the deprivation with that social identity as well.

Problems Created by Government Policies

The discrepancies mentioned above can only be comprehensively addressed by the school administration, at the policy level. Even then, homogenised policy leaves gaps, and no way of filling them. As Murshidabad's Baikuntha Mallick says, that in his experience, many children who are five years old on paper do not achieve the intellectual maturity that one expects from a five-year old (which is the age of enrolment in West Bengal). As a result, if age is the only criteria for enrolment, such child has to be accepted by the school, but she will not be able to follow the class. He also complains about the fact that education policy has now done away with entrance test, so that teachers cannot tell during enrolment which child will be suitable for which class, irrespective of age. Srabani Saha from Lalgola High Madrasa Primary School recounts: "One of our students dropped out of school. After two years, she came back. Now I don't know which class to accept her in". Other teachers have mentioned that if children who had once dropped out are taken back into their age-appropriate class, then this affects the performance of the whole class. Other teachers have mentioned children with special needs. Mostly, there are no special schools for them, and keeping them in the primary schools disrupts lessons for the other children.

The underlying theme of most of these complaints is the lack of infrastructure and human resource. Students from marginalised communities can be considerably energised if the school administration can send them a teacher they can socially identify with. This is especially true

about communities whose mother tongue is different from Bangla or Hindi. So in conclusion, a serious analysis of current educational policy is called for, in particular a re-hauling of provisions made for the education of marginal social groups. Alongside, a change in dominant social ideas and points of views must also be changed.

The Schoolhouse and classrooms

Efficient running of a school essentially depends on its infrastructure a great deal. The very first thing that comes to mind when we think of a school, is the school house. It is becomes impossible for us to visualise a school without a schoolhouse. From teachers' writings, however, we come to know that there was a time when many schools in the state were literally homeless. Monotosh Kumar Ghosh, who teaches at Mahinagar Free Primary School at Raigunj, writes:

In September of 1980, I was transferred to Kathandari Free Primary School close to my village. But the problem I had in my previous school persisted here: there was no school building. Most of the time classes were held in the verandah of various neighbouring houses or gardens.

We have come to know that this school now has a school building, but that does not negate the fact that it was without a building of its own for more than ten years.

Although things have improved overall since then, yet conditions are still not adequate. 55% of the teachers who have spoken about school buildings have said that their schools are in a pitiable state. Day to day lessons gets hampered due to lack of maintenance of schoolrooms. Others have said that they have to teach in incomplete rooms - rooms without windows or doors. 70% of

teachers discussing school houses agree that the number of classrooms in the school is inadequate, forcing two or four classes to be held simultaneously in the same room. Azharul Islam from Raigunj recounts his experience thus: 'In 2003, the Kachua Primary School had 418 students, according to the attendance register. There's just one classroom with no windows. A new classroom is being built. There are no teaching equipments in the classroom, not even a blackboard. There are 5 teachers, classes are usually held under the tree'. Some of the teachers maintain that in spite of the Government initiating a number of acts in favour of proper infrastructure of primary schools but lack of proper distribution process has magnified the problem manifold. But most of the teachers have mentioned the assistance of District Primary Education Projector (DPEP) in terms of infrastructural aid. Later the Sarva Shiksha Mission has also released funds for construction of extra room and other expenses which has benefited the quite a number of primary schools to considerable extent.

Electricity is a primary component in a school's infrastructure. Electricity is yet to reach most of the primary schools. The teachers' write ups inform us that almost 50% of the schools do not have electricity connections which make teaching and learning especially tiresome during summer months. They teachers admit that extreme heat of the summer afternoons leave them thoroughly exhausted therefore the condition of the children is easily imaginable. Some of the classrooms are made of asbestos, which heightens the teachers and students' sufferings. Palash Sarkar of West Gopalpur Primary School, Raigunj, says 'When the blistering heat of summer descends we have to sit in a boiling hot room, desperate for some breeze. Looking at my students' condition, I often think if I as an adult cannot endure the heat how can those little children!' There is no end to amazement! Though the teachers can make no arrangement to combat the winter chill, they have all the good intention to fight the scorching summer yet they can't. Who would pay for electricity?

Deokhand FP School's Ram Kamal Ghosh says that the lack of electricity indicates a bias against primary schools. According to him, even if a primary school and secondary school are established at the same time, students of the secondary school have provisions for computers, lights, fan and adequate seating. In the primary school however, the children still have to tolerate the heat and sit on the floor as they try to learn from their teachers. To this, Purulia's

Modonmohan Mondal adds that in his experience, a school that has electric connection shows an increase in children's attendance.

Modonmohan Mondal, who teaches at Gopalgunj Primary School, has also added that seating arrangements are necessary in every classroom. After he arranged for benches in two classrooms himself, attendance in school went up. It should be mentioned here that 75% of all teachers discussing school buildings and infrastructure have written to say that their schools lack even benches for the children to sit on. On the other hand, Maldah's Debdulal Biswas - teacher at Chikhari Primary School - made an observation which is as perceptive as it is moving:

We teachers sit on chairs swinging our legs in front of students. We have a table in front of us. But those, for whom we have this job, thanks to whom we enjoy the security of a home, clothes and food, sit at our feet. They eat their mid-day meal while sitting on gunny sacks. It would be much better if we could arrange for benches and high-benches for them.

The Right to Education Act makes it compulsory to have separate toilets for girls and boys in the school. 19 teachers have discussed the matter of toilets in schools, but very few of them have been able to say that their school has separate toilets for both girls and boys. The teachers' words are proof enough demonstrating how far this act has been made effective in schools. Out of 348 teachers 19 have discussed toilet facility as a problem in their schools. Very few of them have actually said that there are separate toilets for girls and boys in the school. It is very true that a separate toilet is very necessary for girls in every school. According to the statistics of 2010-11, 59% of West Bengal's schools don't have a separate toilet for female students, while according to the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan State Report Card, only 28% of schools have a separate dedicated toilet for girls (overall only 70% of schools have a common toilet). Teachers too have not discussed the matter of girls' toilets extensively. Besides education it is important that the children enjoy good health. For good hygiene and health condition it becomes necessary to follow a proper scientific procedure like having separate toilets for boys and girls in schools. Yet there are schools without the minimum toilet facility. Amongst the few teachers who have discussed the issue 32% of teachers have said that their schools have one general toilet, among them a few have added that these toilets are not fit for use. Not all teachers have seen it as an infrastructural failure, however. There are many children who are not in the habit of using proper

toilets. For example, Modonmohan Mondal, the teacher in Gopalgunj primary school Purulia writes:

Even though drinking water and toilets have been arranged for everywhere, we have not been completely successful in getting students to use the toilets. The chief reason for this I think, is that children from socially and economically backward households are not used to seeing toilets in their house and as a result, become used to using the field for their needs. This habit is reflected at school as well. This problem is therefore difficult to solve unless their economic conditions improve or their social consciousness changes.

This is a very valid point, however, teaching a child hygienic habit - amongst them how to use a toilet - should be part of a teacher's responsibility. Using the toilet is a part of hygienic education, who else but a teacher can impart that?

The Right to Education Act also makes it compulsory to provide potable drinking water in schools. A child's well being depends a lot on regular drinking of clean water. Practically however, this is dependent on the condition of the local water supply. There are a number of areas where the drinking water is not clean enough. According to the education act every school should have free and adequate clean water supply system. Out of 348 teachers only 5.5% have mentioned problems in their local water supply, so from this we can assume that a greater number of schools are now being supplied with clean drinking water. However it should be kept in mind that a few teachers who have said that there is water supply in their school, have also said that this water is not potable.

The connection between regular physical exercises or games, and excellence in education is very deep. For proper growth and development of children, both are required. Each school should have a playground for children. The RTE 2009 also enshrines this belief. However we see that only 8% of teachers have discussed the matter. There can be two reasons behind this paltry number, either the problem is not as acute in most of our schools, or teachers do not feel the need to emphasise on games. Of the few teachers who have discussed the matter, 26% have said that the fields they have access to are not at all suitable for playing. Along with a playground a suitable garden can help the children learn gardening. Some vegetables from the kitchen gardens can thus be used for the children's Midday meal. Baruipur Biswaschak FP School's Surjodeb

Manna emphasises this lack, 'Taking children to play in the field or teaching them how to tend to a garden would be both enjoyable and educative. However, we do not have provisions for this. Even though there is a playground, it is not in a usable condition'.

That such efforts can be very enjoyable for children is recorded by Mohd. Jinnat Hossain:

It has been 5 years that we have planted mango trees in the school compound with the money provided by the Sarva Shiksha Mission. The trees bore fruit this year. A few days back, we picked the mangoes and kept them in the office room to ripen. Yesterday, we gave each child two ripe mangoes. This has caused a great stir in the whole village. I am now absolutely determined to keep doing things like this. Let's see what I can do next.

This touching experience exemplifies how small gestures are instrumental in changing the environment around the school.

Here it should be mentioned that every teacher agrees that the money from the District Primary Education Committee and Sarva Shiksha Mission has been very helpful in making improvements to their schools. 46 teachers have directly mentioned the infrastructural changes that they could bring about with such grants which they received at different occasions.

Finally, we come to the most important component of a school's infrastructure and resource, the teacher. A school can continue somehow without large classrooms or a playground, but it cannot continue without a teacher. According to the Right to Education Act, the highest PTR in a classroom should be 30:1. Only 43% of teachers attending our workshop have reported this ratio in their school. It is clear that it has not been possible to organise teachers according to the requirement. From the teachers' writings we see that not only do schools have inadequate number of teachers with respect to the number of students, they also have inadequate number of teachers with respect to the number of classes. Pradeep Kumar Roy, who teaches at Dhularam Lower Basic Primary School at Jalpaiguri, writes:

A big handicap in improving the quality of education in primary schools is the lack of availability of teachers. For the last two years at my school, two teachers have had to handle 300 students and 5 classes. I fail to understand how anyone can teach in situations like this. We did try to create a pedagogical system where one group of students would

teach another group of students, but this is not a permanent solution. What we had to do was giving written work to some students while teaching the others. The real solution to this problem would be recruiting more teachers, but recruitment doesn't happen properly. There are schools, who going by their PTR, do not need a new teacher, yet new teachers are assigned to them. Other schools like mine do not get new teachers. This problem should be solved.

The problem of inefficient distribution of teachers has been touched upon by many. Baharampur's Rabiul Islam says that he has seen cases of misdistribution within a block or a circle even if the total number of students and teachers in the block remains the same. He adds that in urban areas number of teachers is far more compared to that of the students. They feel such discrimination should be immediately put to an end. Coochbehar's Abdus Sattar Mia has complained that lack of transparency in the DPSC's teacher recruitment policy has left many schools in the Sheetalkuchi block without adequate teachers. This problem, according to some teachers, becomes a deterrent for children coming to school regularly: Kosco Primary School's Uttam Kumar Majhi and Gangarampur Ruphata Primary School's Jayanta Barman have said that enrolment and attendance have both improved at their schools once the number of teachers became adequate. A different sort of maldistribution can be seen in the case of Maldahh Beenapani Primary School's head-teacher Ajoy Kumar Kundu, who writes that when he first joined in 2007, the number of teachers in this school was 3 while the number of students was 8. Gradually, with improving enrolment, the number of students rose to 40, and with the transfer of one teacher, the number of teachers was reduced to two.

Yet other teachers have mentioned the necessity of at least one female teacher per school. They say that in their experience, children are more attracted towards female teachers. Girls in the 12-13 age range, especially feel more comfortable discussing their problems with a female teacher.

The workshop was also attended by a few teachers from the Shishu Shiksha Kendras. From their writings we see that the SSKs are very backward infrastructurally. Most of them are without a building of their own. Classes are either held under a tree or in the verandah of generous neighbours. No SSK is supplied with clear drinking water. The toilets are also in very poor condition. Indeed most SSKs don't even have a common toilet, much less separate ones for boys and girls. In conclusion, we can say that some of the teachers have expressed their displeasure a

little too strongly, but we must also keep in mind that this dissatisfaction, anger or resentment has been fermented by years of many-faceted deprivations. The hostile conditions that they have to fight every day just to hold classes would test the patience of even the most dedicated teacher. However it has also been encouraging to read stories of individual effort and their success. Let us conclude on a positive note with the experience of Aparna Banerjee, whose school has recently improved to an 'ideal institution':

The song says, 'That red-clay road which leads away from the village...' - yes, that red-clay road leads to my school. The picture that comes to mind when one hears the term 'an ideal primary school'? My school is just like that. It is a two-storied building with an open field in front, and within the school compound, a prettily-tended garden. But not all schools have been as lucky as us. Inadequate teachers, insufficient infrastructures are all problems that should be solved quickly. The matter of recruiting sufficient number of teachers and assigning them to the right schools is especially important.

Meals at school, and Other Ingredients

The Mid-day Meal

The Mid-day Meal programme is a much-discussed and debated subject. Not just amongst those involved in the supplemental-nutrition programmes, but also amongst the general populace of West Bengal. No other government programme has generated this amount of discussion and criticism since the Land Reform Bill of the 1970s and 80s.

This is what Krishnendu Ghosh, teacher at Murshidabad's Karnasubarna Sukanta Primary School, has to say about the effect of the meal:

When it is time for the narrow embankments to come up, then across the paddy fields and on dust-covered feet, stepping on crackling bamboo leaves and flying before the wind they would come. With entranced eyes, they would come, to the school-house. But then they would have to go away. Sreetan would have to go away. But now, he has the school meal to eat.

So a child, who used to run away from school, is now kept back in it just so he can eat his lunch. Of the 348 write-ups that have come to us via our teachers' writing workshops, 166 (48%) mention the mid-day meal. Like Krishnendu Ghosh, several of them wanted us to know how effective the MDM programme was in improving attendance in schools. Giasuddin Mondol or Haridoba Primary School (Murshidabad) compares the situations before and after the start of the cooked MDM programme:

Earlier, children would often say, 'Sir I want to go home'. Why? Because their stomachs would ache. How can one blame the stomach? The child has come to school with hunger in his belly, without eating anything at all. The coming of the MDM has solved this problem.

However, only two of the 166 teachers who had mentioned the MDM programme have directly attributed increase in student-retention to the school meal, and only three the drop in drop-outs rates. 49 teachers (30%), on the other hand, spoke of increasing attendance at schools after the beginning of the MDM. They also spoke of a new liveliness in the children. Roichuddin Khan - teacher at the South 24 Paragranas Rampur Mathuranagar Free Primary School - opines, 'An afternoon meal at school has made the students more lively and active. As a result, disregard for school and attendance has gone down. Simultaneously, parental interest in sending their children to school regularly has also increased'.

Before the MDM programme was implemented, several children came to school on an empty stomach. Their attention was focused on their hunger, and on food. During lessons they would squirm, thinking of the time when they could finally go home and put a few fistfuls of food in their mouth. The MDM has changed this situation for the better, and has consequently affected the level of nutrition in these children. 37 (22.3%) teachers made this connection explicitly. Jalpaiguri's Gayerkata Grild Primary School's teacher Bhabotosh Sarkar notes that in his area, especially, the mid-day meal is very important for the growth and well-being of children, as most parents in the neighbourhood are indifferent to the diet and health of the children. The chief reason for this is their poverty. 'Parents would be kept busy all day looking for work or collecting dry wood in the forests. So the children came to school starving or half-fed. Most of them were anaemic and with rotund tummies'.

That food in an empty stomach increases a child's general health and his immediate ability to learn has been emphasised by ten teachers in their writing. Tapan Bhuniyaa, from South 24 Paragrana's Gangapur Free Primary School writes:

Most of our students come to school without having eaten a full meal or a tiffin. Given this, the MDM is very important to those aspiring to learn. After the demands of the stomach has been met, paying attention to studies becomes easier. In a word, the meal makes it easier to keep them in school till the school-day is over.'

Shankar Roy Chaudhuri, teacher at Jagaddal Colony Primary School in South 24 Paraganas, writes, 'Attendance has gone up since the introduction of the mid-day meal, even if the children do not always pay attention to their studies. They have acquired a better-nourished look. We are trying to convert this into greater interest in their studies'. Other teachers have mentioned a phenomenon that should make all of us consider the acuity of hunger in our country seriously: since the mid-day meal programme began, parents have begun enrolling their toddlers to school along with their school-age children. Their motivation is to ensure that their toddlers get at least one full meal, along with their older children. This creates a problem for the teachers, because toddlers do not possess the capability to follow lessons. Yet according the no-detention policy, once enrolled, they must be sent to the next class in the next academic year, irrespective of how much they have learnt. Thus hunger has reduced the age of enrolment in practice.

Although nearly every teacher has spoken of the necessity and positive effects of the MDM programme, a handful of teachers have pointed out their detrimental effects. Abhijit Kumar Mondal of Noridana Lower Basic in South 24 Paraganas writes that:

At my school, the Mid-day Meal programme was stopped for a long time because of problems with the self-help groups. Recently the programme has started again. We saw that the number of students who came to school when the programme was suspended is more or less the same as the students who come now. But the healthy environment in which we used to teach when the programme was suspended is no more. Time that could earlier be devoted to teaching has also been reduced to accommodate the mid-day meal.

Murshidabad's Deepak Kumar Roy, who teaches at Kajishaha Primary School speaks similarly:

In my opinion the Mid-day Meal is a handicap for improving the quality of education. Aware parents enrol their children in private schools and naturally, the children are doing well. And the lower, poor families of the village send their children to our school for the sake of the afternoon meal. It is not surprising that the children leave school under different excuses once school is over.

Kaliganj Primary School's Sahara Basu, also from Murshidabad, says that fights between teachers and the women of the mid-day meal programme occur almost daily, which harm the environment of the school.

Sometimes the problem becomes one of religion and social identity. A teacher tells us that even the mid-day meal throws up multiple problems; 'Amongst the few self-help groups in our area, there are many Hindu women, plus a few adivasi women. But a long-standing problem here is, if Hindus cook, the Muslim students won't eat. If Muslims cook, Hindu students will not eat.

We have opposing testimonies, of course. In many instances teachers have reported that the MDM has become the mechanism for communal unity once the teachers convinced all the students to eat their lunch regularly, irrespective of who cooked it. But that does not negate the instances of disharmony which the MDM programme has brought to the fore.

Apart from social and pedagogic problems that a few teachers have said the mid-day meal causes them, many teachers have mentioned financial and administrative lacks of the programme. Delayed payments (which enforce teachers or self-help group workers buying ingredients on loan), poor quality of supplied rice, inadequate provisioning et al pervade the state. If the widely-supported and beneficial MDM programme is to continue supporting the primary school system, these matters must be resolved first, and quickly.

Difference by Clothes

A small, sensitive boy comes to school for the first time holding his parents' hands. He is wearing his best clothes, a slightly tattered shirt with a few patches. When classes begin, however, he sees that there are two other boys wearing new clothes. He keeps seeing those boys every day, but cannot summon the courage to talk to them. Questioning his agricultural-labourer parents, he comes to know that those neatly-turned out boys come from a wealthy household.

They're rich people. Thus visually different clothes instil a sense of class difference in a small child. A. K. Q. M. V. Kabeer Hossain, who teaches at Murshidabad's Kalichuna Primary School, says:

Children are very sensitive. They crumble at the slightest hurt. The child who comes to my primary school in his torn clothes sees every day that his neighbour goes to a private school in a school-bus, wearing pretty clothes. This makes him feel inferior, even if only to a small extent. It also decreases his interest in his studies.

Out of the 41 teachers who have discussed the matter of school uniforms, 10 have written about their students' who are too poor to even afford 'proper' clothes. We have read about children who walk barefoot, who are thin with undernourishment, whose clothes do not have buttons. Jalpaiguri Loknathpur Dangi Special Cadre Primary School's Tapan Das says:

The parents are very badly off, and their economic weakness affects our students directly. Never mind the food many of our students do not even have enough clothes to wear. In the hard winters when they come to school wearing just a thin, tattered dress, standing in front of them in warm sweaters, shoes and socks makes me feel guilty.

Elaborating further, Purulia Gopalganj Primary School's teacher Madan Mondal says, 'Attendance goes down 5%-10% in winter, because children do not own the kind of winter clothes that will allow them to go about freely on a winter's day'.

There was a time when only female students would be given uniforms from the government. Then it was stopped. Children would come to school in their regular clothes. Now the Sarva Shiksha Mission has started allotting Rs. 400 per student. Still, a gap remains. The allotment is for all female students, male students from the Schedule Caste communities, and male students from the Scheduled Tribe communities. What justifies the exclusion of male students of the General category? Several teachers have raised this question. In their opinion, while it is a good thing that the government has begun providing money for uniforms again, they have not been able to create an unbiased system. They have also said that Rs. 400 is very little for two sets of uniforms. The policy that governs the provision of uniforms to students must be reviewed soon with these criticisms in mind.

Poor Arrangements

Along with clothes, the need for supplying children with stationary goods has been mentioned by 41 teachers. Jalpaiguri Nagaisuri Tea Estate Primary School's teacher Soumyajit Basu says that financial impediments become educational impediments, because the labourer parents of his students cannot afford to buy them notebooks, pens, pencils and other things necessary in the classroom. Overall, 18 teachers have stated that their students are too poor to afford these stationary goods, which naturally impedes their learning process. Of the remaining, 10 teachers however, hold a different opinion. According to them, the lack is not economical, but of interest. The parents of these students do not have the necessary awareness to realise that their children must be bought notebooks and pencils when they are enrolled in school.

However, some teachers, such as Rabindranath Sarkar from Maldahh's Moheshpur Primary School, try to solve the problem instead of assigning blame. He writes:

Bimal Rabidas. At that time, a student of Class 2. If he comes to school for a day, he stays away for three. When I asked his classmates, they said Bimal is begging. Why is he begging? Well, he doesn't have a father, and his mother is ill, that's why. I told them to bring him in the next day. I spoke to him, told him how important it is to acquire an education. He came of his own volition the next day. Didn't have notebooks and pencils. I bought him some. He is now in Class 5. Like this, we have had to help a lot of students with stationary.

Some other teachers use the money from the school's Contingency Fund to buy books for the children, but the Fund amount is very little – Rs. 50. But there is hope. Rangafala Jomadar Para Shishu Shiksha Kendra's sahayika Shoktirani Gayen says that the South 24 Paraganas' Kulpi Block Office provides the children of this SSK with pencils and notebooks.

Teachers are similarly unhappy with the supply of textbooks; 25 teachers have said that the books supplied are either inadequate in number, or they do not reach in time. During the workshops, several teachers told us that not only had textbooks not arrived in time, attendance

registers for teachers and students had also not reached schools yet. It is hardly surprising that beginning lessons without textbooks would harm student's learning and performance.

Alongside these specific areas of helping children, some teachers have asked the school administration to consider giving scholarships to poor or backward students. The extra money, they say, would be a big motivator in keeping these children in school.

All of the matters discussed in this chapter are dependent on each other if we go deep and examine their roots. To keep a school properly functional and the students regular and attentive, it is necessary to improve every one of these matters – from mid-day meals to classroom stationary. As teachers have pointed out, some of the matters need changes in policy. These must be looked into immediately to help the development of primary education in the state.

Teaching and Learning: Various Aspects of Educating Children

From the teachers' discussions, it is clear that the introduction of the mid-day meal has increased attendance in schools. We have even seen parents sending their younger children to school - children who are not yet of the legal age to begin formal schooling. In some instances, this increase in attendance is owed in part to the urge to quench hunger. In such situations, teaching or keeping the children in an environment conducive to learning is a significant responsibility, that these primary school teachers have been fulfilling. A large part of this is the processes through which teachers 'educate' their students. Some of them believe in going beyond the strictures of traditional teaching methods and making teaching a playful process. Others prefer to replicate older systems, believing them to be more effective. Seventy-one teachers have discussed teaching methods in their writing. Of these, almost 50 percent feel that newer methods are more effective in engaging the attention of students, and enable them to grasp the subject-matter faster. They have also pointed out these methods are far more joyful than older methods, and consequently, quicken and enhance the development of children. While on this subject, mention must be made of Ratna Bhattacharya, teacher at Baruipur's Rajpur Padmamani Primary Girls' School, who says she sets her students creative writing assignments every now and then. This is what she says:

One day I gave these lines to my Class 4 students: ‘Gachhe gachhe phul phutechhe [The flowers have blossomed on the trees]’, and ‘Holud pakhi holud pakhi [Yellow bird, yellow bird]’. The girls were supposed to write lines rhyming with these two. For the first, a girl wrote, ‘Gachhe gachhe phul phutechhe; Moumachhira oi chhutechhe [The flowers have blossomed on the trees; See honey-bees run to them]’. Another child wrote, ‘Holud pakhi holud paki, amar kachhe ashbe naki? [Yellow bird, yellow bird; Would you like to come to me?]’ I saw, with great surprise, that the child from a poor family who doesn’t even talk in the classroom, has written ‘Gachhe gachhe phul phutechhe, shiuli phule gachh bhorechhe [The flowers have blossomed on the trees; The shiuli flower has covered its plant]’. Tears came to my eyes. Previously, I had classified this girl as a ‘can’t do anything’ child. These experiences, these lessons are the assets of my teaching career.

Similar voices have been heard from the other districts. Similar stories have been recounted in the teachers’ write-ups. The new methods of teaching, they attest, have succeeded in lessening the fear that children felt towards older classroom delivery methods.

Sometimes, the socioeconomic backgrounds of children are not conducive to acquiring an education. At other times, familial situations put young people in such frames of minds that their ability to participate in the classroom diminishes. Murshidabad’s Subimal Ghosh has written about such an incident:

One day, while teaching Bangla to Class 2, I met Saraswati Hajra. Every child in that classroom was trying to do some schoolwork or another. Saraswati, however, kept repeating ‘I don’t know how to write’, and packing her books and writing-slate into her schoolbag. She failed to write even after I encouraged her personally. Later, I asked my teaching assistant if he knew the child, and why she was behaving the way she was. He told me that Saraswati’s mother had passed away a month back, and her father had already remarried. The next day when I reached the classroom, I first called Saraswati to me and asked her, ‘Did your mother give you rice today?’ She said, ‘Yes’. I patted her head affectionately and said, ‘You’re a very good girl’. She was delighted, and kept standing next to me. Seeing her new happiness, I asked her to begin writing with the others. This time, she was genuinely interested and began, and with my help could finally start writing.

If teachers thus pay special attention to the ‘backward’ children of the classroom, and try to know the underlying reasons behind their lack of success, then the problems can often be solved with little effort. The important thing is to come out of routine-teaching, and take an interest in the students. Kakdwip’s Sheikh Abdul Momin offers the same point of view. He points out that in earlier methods of teaching, the teacher was the central point of classroom delivery. The modern view, however, is that education should be child-centric. The teacher’s role is that of a guide’s. They will indicate the ways in which children should proceed, but all actual learning will be through the children’s own experience. To aid the process, the government has begun providing schools with a TLM (teaching-learning method) allowance, or an allowance for acquiring materials necessary for this new process of schooling (we have discussed the TLM in detail later in this book). However, opinions differ on what TLM materials should ideally be. Jalpaiguri’s Mala Munshi, for example, thinks of them a little differently from most:

It is said that child-centric learning methods will help a child develop his or her full potential. I think, from my experience, that the teacher who has been teaching a child who best understands where the child’s strength and weaknesses lie. She is also the best judge of the method by which particular children learn best, and it is her duty to devise methods of providing it to them. Thus a teacher and the things that constitute her teaching environment are, in my opinion, the primary TLM materials.

Other teachers have also disputed the recent and oft-heard claim that teaching is impossible with TLM materials. Murshidabad’s Baikuntha Mallik says that his success with his students depends on experimenting with teaching methods: ‘I succeed by employing one method after another. The contribution of TLM to the learning process must be recognised, however, it is not right to believe in the idea that learning is impossible without TLMs. It is imperative to identify those TLMs that are actually effective for the teaching and learning process’.

Parthapratim Kar from Jalpaiguri is amongst those several teachers who agree with the importance of identifying the right kind of TLM aid to use for specific lessons. He writes:

The role of TLMs is a very acceptable one in enhancing a child’s understanding. In my own experience, I have noticed that children understand matters far more easily if TLM methods are used. For example, in Class 4 I used an actual plant to illustrate the lesson on

plant-life. It made the lesson very easy for the students to grasp. Besides, I have also had good results with the use of maps, charts and pocket boards.

So on the one hand, we have considerable support for new methods of teaching, with teachers vouching for the efficacy of child-friendly learning tools. Alongside, however, there are teachers who have protested against these changes in pedagogy. The majority of them base their protest on the grounds that teachers do not understand the new methods well themselves, and consequently cannot implement them properly in the classroom. As a result, the children are left stranded; they learn nothing. Some of them have also said that the workshops conducted to impart these new methods to teachers are a huge waste, because an enormous amount of money is spent organising them without any observable returns. Others have seen, in these methods, a cultural disconnect; as a teacher from Coochbehar wrote, 'Teaching in these foreign methods are only suitable for children of the educated strata of society'. According to him, only children with educated parents -- especially mothers -- are the only children capable of learning through 'playful' methods, because then they can learn 'properly' through 'their homework'. Children who have no help at home in learning the traditional way shall not, in his opinion, benefit from the new methods.

In practice, we have seen that methods of joyful learning have considerable impact on a child's mind, and they imbibe their lessons with far greater willingness and ease through these methods. The literacy status or educational achievements of their parents does not significantly improve or lessen a child's ability to learn in the classroom. Besides, the entire point of these learning methods is to remove the burden of 'homework' and make learning an in-school phenomenon. Given all this, it is difficult to accept that the 'joyful learning' process works only with children of educated families. Indeed, one might be persuaded to argue the opposite. However, a teacher from Purulia agrees with his colleague from Coochbehar. He writes:

When we had started our schooling the first we learnt the alphabets. After that sounds, sentences etc. I think that process was better than the current one. After discussing the matter with various people I have seen that those children whose aware parents had begun teaching the alphabets and numbers to them from four, four-and-a-half or even younger years are the ones who do well in class. On the other hand, the schools do not even have the infrastructure required to implement the modern techniques learnt at the workshops.

‘Aware’ is an oft-used code in our educational discourse for the middle and affluent classes. Its implication is that poor or working-class parents are incapable of caring for the educational development of their progeny. In a divided society, poverty is such a cyclic curse that it is impossible for poor families to provide the same advantages to children as more affluent families can. We also forget that helping formerly illiterate families become literate is an enormous commitment in itself. Had they been capable of pulling themselves out of this cycle, we would not have needed state schools at all.

The lack of proper infrastructure in schools is certainly a problem that needs addressing, but there is reason to doubt the assertion that child-centric teaching requires elaborate infrastructural aid. We have observed joyful and effective classes being held under a tree. Indeed, teachers bear witness to such practices in their writing.

A few teachers have also mentioned the specific limitations of following the new methods. One aspect of it, as mentioned above, is bypassing explicit lessons in alphabets and moving onto books. The teachers note that the children are capable of repeating the lessons they hear, but are incapable of answering questions about it. Even if these teachers are few in number, we must acknowledge the fact that they implemented child-centric methods in their teaching, and faced problems because of it. Workshops, training centres and other relevant platforms should therefore have room for feedback from teachers and discussions of such problems.

Apart from the matters mentioned above, most teachers have mentioned the ‘problem’ of private tuition. There is great difference, they have pointed out, between the methods employed by the teachers of state schools and private tutors. Usually, this means that while teachers use newer methods at school, private tutors keep to the older techniques. Baruipure’s Prafulla Kumar Haldar says that the methods employed by teachers to teach maths is ‘the exact reverse’ of the way the parents teach their children: ‘We know, and teach, that ‘0’ is a number, but for parents, ‘0’ is not a number’. Other teachers have written about similar discords between the old and new systems, employed by parents and school-teachers, respectively. Other teachers have written about active resistance to newer pedagogic methods, because parents trust the older systems that they know, and/or have grown up with themselves. For example, Baikuntha Mallick from Baharampur’s Gopinathpur Dhipidanga Primary School wrote that parents do not approve of

productive, creative or joy-oriented work in the classroom. All they want their children to do is learn how to read and write and study from textbooks. He says that is why in our classrooms, teachers ignore the more positive aspects of the new teaching methods because they have to, after all, pay attention to what the parents say. Otherwise, trouble in the running of the school crop up. On the same subject, Safikujjman from Murshidabad says something very important. He says:

The new workshops that we keep attending ask us to use new methodologies. However when teachers try to use these new methodologies in the school, they don't keep in mind that parents at home keep teaching their children in the old ways. Therefore the pressure on the children increases. Whatever the workshops tell us, we think teachers should reserve the right to teach children according to their environment. The immediate problems faced by children cannot be solved successfully by staying within certain pre-determined rules. This is where a teacher's own creative and productive capabilities come to the fore and I think teachers should have this space to employ such capabilities.

In quite a few write ups we have noticed that teachers have faced problems, but have used their own resourcefulness to solve those problems themselves. For example Barun Majumdar from Coochbehar says that there is a predilection among children to learn tables in the traditional way. However he has seen that children who learn the tables thus confuse in their five-times tables and their seven-times tables. Once he encountered the problem, he used it as a reason to introduce the newer ways of learning the tables in his classroom. Of course, he too faced considerable problems while attempting to introduce the new method. However, his persistence bore fruit, and now his students learn their tables in the new, scientifically proven method.

The mental pressure that Safikujjman talks about is exacerbated by the presence of private tutors. Those teachers who have commented about the phenomenon of private tuition have said that those parents who have enough time and inclination to take a personal interest in their children's education have all believed that a private tutor is a necessity for their children to excel at school. Of course, this action is rooted in care and concern for their child, however it makes trouble for the teacher and ultimately for the children. Most private tutors are not in touch with modern pedagogy and teach children in the old-fashioned ways. In the school however, methodologies are completely different. As a result, most children become confused. Sometimes, if the teachers

at school follow the new methods properly, and assign no homework, the child still acquires a fear of learning from the masses of homework assigned by their private tutor. Baruipur's Pradyot Ghosh says

It is now impossible to finish the entire curriculum in the school. Even if the teachers try very hard, some of it still remains unfinished. Then the child's parents have to step in to teach the child those remaining parts. However a large group of our students go to private tutors in a group. Now here the child faces a problem. Are they going to finish the leftover studies from school or are they going to prepare the different homework that was given by their private tutor? The joy of learning that is emphasised in our school system is absent in this system. Indeed by going to a private tutor, the child loses interest in his education overall, including the interest of coming to school.

Some teachers have attempted to resolve this problem by discussing it with the parents. However many of them have written that the discussion yielded no results because parents have some deeply held ideas about what an education should be, and they have an equally deep conviction that a private tutor is necessary for a child's educational development. Almost all parents spoken to, the teachers agree, seem to think that attending a private tutor's lessons are more important than going to school.

Therefore, a few of the teachers have recommended that private tutor be taken within the purview of the training program meant for state school teachers. This way, even if private tuition cannot be stopped, it can at least bring private tutors in sync with the methodologies that the children's school teachers are obliged to follow. A small number of teachers have also mentioned the role of parents. Mafiqul Islam, from Murshidabad's Dewanpara Primary School, has said that in his opinion, to make the Sarva Sikshya Abhijan successful, one cannot focus only on the teachers. One must also undertake programmes aimed at the parents. Their perceptions about education must be taken into account and discussed. In particular, he says, this is vital for bringing parity between classroom teaching and private tuition. Some other teachers have mentioned the use of visual media for bettering the classroom delivery process. They have said that children pay more attention to audio-visual inputs than they do to textual media. However, Baruipur's Pradip Manna has said that too many new inputs at the same time can

confuse the teachers themselves and therefore before implementing any new techniques because they appear appealing at first glance, the new methodologies must be discussed at length.

Some of the other teachers have also criticised their own roles and contribution in the current state of primary education in the state. Rabiul Islam from Murshidabad has said that even though time constraint is a problem, a significant part of the textbooks are ignored during every academic year. Teachers must become more aware and more responsible towards their duties. On the same subject, a teacher from Jalpaiguri has brought forth a serious complaint that is indeed hard to forgive. This is what the teacher has to say:

In the course of the many trainings that I have attended, I have noticed with considerable sorrow that a large percentage of teachers are not willing to accept or implement these new, simple and effective methods. They prefer to follow traditional methods and find excuses so that they can leave the school and go home as quickly as possible.

We hope that this mentality is shared by only a few teachers, however even that is serious enough. For such teachers we would like to like to hold up the examples of shining dedication and innovation that we have seen in some of their colleagues and we hope the latter will inspire the former to change their ways.

The Subject of English

Most primary schools that fall within the purview of our study are located in rural areas. Most of the students come from families whose daily income barely meets their daily living costs. English is a strange and unknown language for them. Conducting lessons in such a language is certainly a challenge for the teachers, but about half the teachers who wrote about teaching English (36 of them) are optimistic of their students performance in this particular subject. Abhik Kumar Dutta from Baruipur writes:

The books and teaching techniques provided to us for English classes are very helpful. A fear of the unknown language is always present in students – I faced this problem when I started teaching English. But when I started showing them various things and telling them what they were called in English without any Bengali mediation, they began learning them quite eagerly. The more English I

spoke in class, the more eager they were to pick it all up. Given that these children have never heard even a word of English at home and even speak Bengali in the local dialect, it makes me really proud to hear them speak English.

This pride and satisfaction is reflected in the writings of a few more teachers who have followed the new methodology of teaching English. Murshidabad's A. K. Q. Mohammad Kabeer Hossain says:

We have to be especially attentive when teaching English. The methodology that we have been instructed to follow is very scientific. I speak from my personal experience – teaching English via English is both effective and fun for the students. The repeated use of simple words and short, every day sentences helps students and indeed some teachers get over their fear of the language.

This new method that the teachers above refer to relies on introducing a child to a new language via sound-association. It is worth mentioning here that this is also how a baby learns his or her mother tongue – by gradually picking up the names of the things and people around them from their mother or other's speech. That is perhaps why the method triggers a child-like joy amongst the students. Kakdwip's Sandhya Naskar says that she no longer has to remember her English lessons' schedule. As soon as the bell rings, children come to collect her for their class. 'I have not been able to teach a single child how to write the English lower-case alphabets without looking at the book', she says, 'but they have gladly picked up the rhymes via songs and games. They may not be able to spell the words, but they have already picked up the names of many things. If I indicate these things by acting, they can all tell me what I am invoking'. So in other words, verbal and oral familiarity comes before children learn the script. This is exactly how they learn their mother tongues too. However, since usually, they grow up in an environment where the mother tongue is constantly spoken, the process of learning is much faster. A language taught for a few hours each week in the classroom will naturally take a little longer. This extra time should be taken into consideration during the framing of the syllabus, and during classroom-teaching.

Of course, this leaves the other half of teachers who wrote about English. The general theme of their opinions was that the new method of teaching is ineffective and unsuitable for non-urban students. A few have also pointed out that while the spoken aspect of the language should be emphasised especially in classes 1 and 2, the written aspect should not be ignored and should

indeed be made the focus of classes 3 and 4, or children will never develop written English skills. It is interesting to note that the teachers who have written about the problems of teaching English have focused exclusively on the effort it would take to implement them. They have not mentioned whether they actually implemented them, and if they did, what actual problems their students faced with it. This being the case, we are forced to conclude that the problem here lies with the teaching, not the learning. Some teachers have pointed this out themselves. A teacher from Maldahhh says quite directly that the new methodologies of teaching English are not used at all, and consigned to the rubbish heap out of prejudice. However, he has also mentioned that with greater unity amongst the teaching community in the state, success stories can travel faster, inspiring reluctant teachers to adopt a new, effective method. A problem, once shared with one's community of peers, is sure to bring forth a solution.

On Textbooks

Most teachers commenting on textbooks agree that the new variants are useful and appealing, however, the process by which they are supposed to be read is disrupted. Once children have the books in hand, their private tutors rush them through the lessons far ahead of the planned curricula. This traditional race for 'finishing' the textbook defeats the purpose of assigning them. According to Abdur Rejjak from the North 24 Paraganas:

The quality of textbooks that we use at school is very high. If they are taught with care, there is no need for children to go to K. G. schools [pre-primary preparatory schools]. A child's mind is impressionable. If we invest a little extra time for them, they will develop much better

Certain other teachers, on the other hand, have complained that the prescribed books are not suitable for contemporary times. They have recommended more careful revision of these books, especially those used for Mathematics, English and in a few instances, Geography. On a related note, Murshidabad's Parthasarathi Roy says, 'Not all subjects are favoured by all students. When these subjects are taught, the tendency of students to run away increases.'

A common complaint about textbooks is that they often arrive too late for the teachers to distribute them in time amongst the students, and begin (and therefore complete) the annual

curricula within the stipulated period. The inadequacy of textbooks and their supply is a matter that most teachers felt should be looked into with some urgency.

The Matter of Syllabus

39 teachers have spoken about the current syllabus. Most of them are of the opinion that the syllabus is not suitable for children, it creates unnecessary pressure on them. They have especially emphasised the need for change in the Bangla, English, History and Geography textbooks. A few dissenters - like Jalpaiguri's Joydeep Roy - has said that textbooks conforming to the new syllabus, especially the ones meant for Geography - need very little revision.

From the discrepancies in opinion and experience, it is clear that different schools experience different sets of problems. Teaching styles also vary from teacher to teacher. As a result, a particular method of teaching might appear quite easy to implement for one teacher, while another might find it very difficult. However, the teachers who brought up the problems of the syllabi have also discussed possible solutions to them. Purulia's Bidyut Banerjee says:

Non-formal education attracts children more. Therefore workshops should focus on techniques in which we can help children learn things in the syllabi by indirect and interesting ways. Keeping a friendly eye and offering a helping hand to children as they create work-sheets in their own way not only helps them become more interested in the material, it also makes them more proactive in the classroom.

Nabaneeta Sarkar puts in another very effective way:

The same child who chats coherently with her friends, tells the whole class about the time she saw a ghost, easily grasps the rules of a new game, fails when it comes to studies. This is because she has learnt to look upon her books as 'studies', not as interesting new things. This is especially true for History and Geography. In such a case, we're bound by responsibility to make the textbooks appealing and attractive for her.

Teachers have also recorded their opinions about the syllabus. According to them, schoolteachers should be part of the body that decides the syllabus. Some teachers have also opined that village

schools should be taken as a model before the administration decides on the syllabi. Debabrata Bhattacharya from Raiganj has a valuable input on the matter. He says:

The creation of the syllabi in a climate-controlled room, and the classrooms in which we teach children are two completely different situations. Village children transport loads on their head, work as reapers on other people's land, and carrying the crop back in addition to studying. Urban children do not face these extra loads, their families surplus income brings greater affluence to their families. Syllabi that are framed ignoring these realities creates a huge difference between the teachers' teaching and the students' capacity to learn.

Play-time and Cultural Events

The new method of teaching emphasises learning through cultural events, games and playing, and class-trips. In our discussions so far we have already seen that joyful or playful teaching facilitates quicker and easier learning, and longer recall periods. Similarly, organising social and cultural functions helps provide children with a platform to develop and practise their extracurricular talents, as well as making the school an attractive and interesting place for them to be in. From the collected writings of teachers we see that most of them encourage such activities in their schools, and parents join in enthusiastically. However, there are also instances where parents have resisted such activities. Murshidabad's Mahamudan Hasan, for instance, mentions that during practice-sessions for his school's cultural day, some parents came to the teachers in a group and protested against such activities. The teachers carried on the practice nonetheless. During the final event, the same parents were amazed and impressed by their children's performance. Ramaprasad Banerjee, also from Murshidabad, has attested to the benefits of hosting such programmes (his school hosted a cultural programme to celebrate Rabindranath Tagore's 150th birth anniversary). Teachers have also spoken positively about educational school trips. Not only do children get to see a wider world than their immediate locality, they also develop a sense of history. Mafikul Islam from Baharampur says that apart from the educational aspect, these trips also provide much-needed mental rest to both teachers and students.

It is undeniable that games, play-time and physical exercise are a vital part of a child's development. It also brings a much-needed variety to a studies-dominated childhood, and indeed makes studies more interesting. All schools should have a playing field to accommodate this need. However, this is not practically possible in all schools, but one must then consider what alternatives are available to children in such an absence.

Homework

A child's education depends on what he or she learns at the school, at least this is how it should be. Unfortunately, we saw that there is an excessive emphasis put on homework or studying at home. It seemed to be almost inevitable to both teachers and parents that without homework, acquiring an education is not possible. However, our experience of education systems throughout the world shows us that there absolutely no need for such a thing as home-tasks at the primary level, and all learning can be delivered via schoolwork. Why then is there such a strong emphasis on homework in our country. Partly, this is because traditionally there has been considerable emphasis on students studying on their own at home. The current generation of teachers have all been educated in that tradition and despite teachers trainings and new methodologies, it is difficult for them to reject the process in which they have been educated. Along with this, we can add the excessive weight of a child's syllabi. The current syllabi make it difficult even for empathic and sincere teachers to complete their teaching within the academic year. Then what happens to those children who don't have someone at home to teach them? Those parents who are capable of teaching their children at home frequently outsource this responsibility to private tutors. In imitation of these more affluent parents, poor and illiterate parents have also begun outsourcing their children's education to private tutors. Rich or poor, they are all convinced that an education cannot be acquired without the intervention of a private tutor. Besides these traditional reasons, there is also the reason of infrastructural failure. It is a very positive thing that enrolment of students has increased manifold in the recent years. However in comparison, the recruitment of teachers has been negligible. As a result, the teacher-student ratio is such that individual attention in the classroom for every student is not possible. This, we have seen, gives birth to considerable frustration and despair among students! Now, quite a few teachers who attended the workshops did write that they tried to finish the entire learning process within the

classroom. Baharampur's Aparna Banerjee made a comment that we found remarkable. She says:

I will speak about my school where most students come from such families who have to work themselves to the bone to obtain two meals a day. Therefore if I tell such parents that please look after your children's education at home, then that is not a very feasible option for them. Therefore my effort is always aimed at teaching my students in simple and effective ways within the classroom. I impart lessons to them as if telling them stories, or having a discussion in the classroom. I have noticed that this helps the children absorb the lessons much better and also retain them much better.

This sort of positive attitude is reflected in the writings of quite a few teachers. Obviously, this helps these children a great deal. However, we must also keep in mind that the goodwill and honest effort of the teachers and their individual effort is not the solution to this problem. Their devotion to their work is certainly going to be central to the solution, however the administration must also take upon itself to ensure that these teachers are capable of fulfilling all their duties as teachers and the school administrators in an organised and comfortable way. Alongside, teachers and parents alike will have to be spoken to about coming out of this tradition of studying at home. There's also the matter of independent choice. If a child is enthusiastic about the innovative ways of learning in the schoolroom and has free time at home, then we might find that the child is picking up certain books of his or her own choice to read at home. Limiting a child's time at home to a re-reading of the school texts is also limiting his or her development. Allowing a child freedom of choice is an important part of an education process.

The problems of linguistic diversity

It is difficult to assess how big a problem diversity of languages is in the urban areas. However from the teachers' write-ups, it is clear that in the rural areas, the problem of language and communication is a big problem. Purulia's Dasharath Mandi writes

Almost 60% of all the students of this school are Santhali. Their mother tongue is Santhali. At home, they speak to their mother, father, brother and friends always in Santhali. Therefore, lessons delivered through the medium of Bengali in the classroom

are difficult for them to follow. As a result in the school, they do not perform according to age-appropriate measures, and start suffering from inferiority complex and lack of confidence. Consequently, many of them drop out of school thinking an education is not for them.

This problem is faced by many schools. Especially in the areas of Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar, the percentage of people speaking Nepali and other local languages is rather large. Purulia sees a significant number of Santhali speaking children. Now, some teachers learn those languages to an effective degree and speak to children in their mother-tongue to make them comfortable in the classroom. Most of them have been very successful in these efforts. For example, Jalpaiguri's Kajal Sutradhar writes

I couldn't understand the language of those who came to the school. I had no idea how to teach them. I didn't know Rajbangshi, I didn't know Sadri. I was very upset. I started thinking, what sort of a place has this job landed me in? At the end of the lessons, tiffin started. I sat in one corner and started thinking about my situation. Eventually I started wondering what could be done about the situation. If I don't understand the children, then how can I make them understand the lessons? However, this was how things carried on. The children couldn't understand Bengali, therefore an environment of learning couldn't be built up in the school and I couldn't decide what I should do as a teacher. Finally I decided that the only way out was for me to understand both Rajbangshi and Sadri, otherwise I wouldn't be able to teach the children Bengali. Now it has become easier for me to talk to children. I understand what they want, what their minds require and the most surprising thing is that I have learnt to speak in both languages by talking to children alone. I went to the school as a teacher for children, however I became a student of these children myself. In this process I have also felt much more emotionally closer to all the students in my school.

What is clear from these narratives is that these children are not being taught in their mother tongue. Instead a foreign language is being imposed on them. According to Alipurduar's Dhee Ganguly, ideas such as 'the mother tongue is like the mother's milk, and primary education should always be through the mother tongue' are completely useless in such circumstances and the situation inevitably raises an ethical question. When these students do not speak Bengali as a mother tongue, when at home they always speak in another language, is it at all ethical to

forcibly impose the language of the majority on them? Would the school administration consider a more inclusive approach towards primary education? Be that as it may, the conversation on this topic amongst teachers shows that a certain section of them makes sincere efforts to overcome the language and ethnicity problem. Every teacher who has brought this problem up has also discussed ways in which he or she has solved or attempted to solve the problem. However the question remains. is personal effort the only way out of this problem? Have policymakers taken it for granted that a teacher assigned to a school whose language he or she doesn't understand will have to first make an effort to learn the local language and then teach his or her students in that language? In any case, even if one does not raise the ethical issues mentioned before about majority and minority languages, it is implied that the teacher always has the capability to learn local languages. However, by the teachers' own admissions, this is not always true. Alipurduar's Sambit Pal writes:

At the beginning of my teaching career, I realised that I was unable to teach the students assigned to me because of the language difference, and this affected me mentally a great deal. It depressed me. Later I tried to understand and become fluent in their language. However I did not succeed. I couldn't teach them through their mother tongue and as a result all of them, my students, their parents, the local people used to all refer to me as 'that Bengali teacher'.

So we see that this not the only solution. One must think of alternative and more fruitful ways in which the language problem must be addressed. Alipurduar's Arup Baran Dutta and other teachers are constant in their efforts to educate Rava-, Rajbangshi- or Sadri-speaking children in Bengali-medium schools. They are sincere in their efforts to make sure that these children don't fall out of the educated demography because of a different mother tongue. The problem persists in areas where even though the language is considered to be the same, the dialect is different enough that children, who have a limited vocabulary and mostly speak to people in their own families or communities, are unable to follow their textbooks. For example, in Maldahh and Raigunj, quite a few primary schools are situated in areas where the local dominant languages are respectively Khotta and Surjopuri – similar to, yet very different from, Bengali and Hindi. Coochbehar's Babloo Sarkar writes that in the school where he teaches, there is absolutely no presence of an open cosmopolitan way of life in the community. As a result, his students all

speak in the local languages of the villages, and at first he did not comprehend what the children were saying at all. Later, upon associating more with the children in a friendly manner, he realised that there are similarities with his own mother tongue and by this realisation he overcame the linguistic difficulties.

Maldahh's Kalidehi Primary School's teacher Upin Murmu writes:

I have realised that children cannot find a compatibility between their own family environments and that of their school because at home and in their villages they speak to their parents, their neighbours and their friends in their mother tongue, in this case, tribal languages and at school they require to communicate in Bengali. In my school, I have seen that because I am a tribal teacher myself, when I speak to the students in their tribal language, they suddenly become enthusiastic about their lessons. They answer spontaneously and they show an interest in the lessons. However when it comes to the other teachers, they are scared, disinterested, and they don't want to engage in the classroom. As a result, teachers who do not speak the children's language do not get the response that is necessary for effective classroom teaching.

Although teachers clearly take initiatives to overcome these cultural differences, the problem must be addressed comprehensively at the policy level, and soon. At the very least, the administration should feel the need to fulfil their responsibility towards those children who enrol themselves with hope, but soon lose confidence and begin to suffer from inferiority because of their own social differences.

Teachers' Training

Half the teachers discussing trainings – organised by the Sarva Shiksha Mission – write they have been helped to a considerable extent by them. A few others, on the other hand, have complained that they are a waste of time. Kakdwip's Anil Kumar Kalsa believes they are an excuse for communal feasting, and Baharampur's Rabiul Islam opines they are a mechanism to quickly spend earmarked money. The absence of a monitoring system to see if the methodologies being imparted are actually followed at the school-level, they say, makes the

workshops an incomplete system. Unless there is a monitoring system in place to oversee their implementation and evaluate their efficacy, there is no point in conducting teachers' trainings.

Another few teachers have complained about the length of the workshops. Some of them have written that they are currently assigned to schools with a shortage of teacher, and if one teacher has to leave for four or five days, running the school becomes impossible. In the absence of teachers, students also stop coming to school, and it is difficult to make them come back even after the teacher returns. Baharampur's Dipak Kumar Roy, Baruipur's Kanakkanti Sarkar and several others have written about the loss of working days from the teaching schedule to attend workshops.

Shishu Shiksha Kendra workers are an overlooked demography when it comes to training. The sahayikas who have attended our workshops have all complained about their complete lack of training. They have all expressed a desire to be trained, stating that knowledge of child development and education will help them fulfil their responsibilities a great deal better. This is a desire that should be taken into account, given how important a sahayika's work is in the context of maternal health, child health, child development and general health performance of a community.

Pass/Fail

The matter of pass/fail has garnered a great deal of media attention recently. However, only 9 teachers have discussed it at our workshops, and all have spoken against the administrative decision to do away with the pass/fail system at the primary level. Justifying this stand, Maldahhh's Soba Haldar writes:

When a child from an illiterate village comes to school, they come from a background where no one has taught them anything so far, and there is no one at home to help them with their studies. In such situations I cannot complete the Class 1 syllabus during school hours, and the child incurs a lack because of this. This child is then pushed up to Class 2 because of the no-detention policy.

Because the child is weak academically, she cannot perform well in Class 2. Yet before she has come to grips with that syllabus, she is sent up to Class 3. We notice that children who were weak to begin with begin to drop out at this stage.

Baruipur's Pradyot Kumar Ghosh harbours similar feeling: 'The no-detention policy ensures children go to the next class, but most of the syllabus of the previous class remains beyond his reach. The same pattern repeats itself with every new class'.

So we see that the opposition to a new measure is not merely on the basis of its newness – although some teachers have also objected to it because it 'changes' a familiar system – but because of a very real problem it introduces in the system. Of course, one might point out that if children are not learning all they need to know in the classroom, then this is more the fault of teaching than of learning. But widespread infrastructural lacks in schools also have a role to play in the problem – after all, the no-detention policy was popularised in schooling systems which are far better equipped than the public primary school system in West Bengal. The other problem that should be mentioned here in connection with the no-detention policy - and also in context of most new changes in schooling - is the lack of clarity in the process of their institution. Teachers would adapt to change much more willingly if they felt they had contributed to the process of the change. However, if a measure alien and strange to them is imposed upon their classrooms and they are ordered to follow it, resentment can cloud their view of the measure itself.

Punishment

This lack of conversation and public debates affect other matters as well. For example, a section of the teachers still believe children cannot be effectively taught without meting out punishments. For example, Baharampur's Shraboni Saha writes:

Psychologists say that teachers express their frustrations with life by beating up the creature at their mercy known as students. Leaving a few unfortunate incidents aside, my question to these experts is this: on whom do people in other professions take out their frustration? Or are teachers the only people who suffer from such mental illness? The situation has become

such that for mild punishment for a wrong-doing, a boy in Class 4 was heard saying, 'I'll put that master in jail'. Whose contribution is this culture? In whose life is there no punishment?

It is true that teachers have several reasons for frustration, but it is also clear that some of it stems from a lack of evidence-based conversation amongst them about the repercussions of punishing children in their care. Another teacher from Murshidabad asserts:

Just like it is our duty to love our students or be affectionate towards them, it should also be our right to correct them when they are wrong. There are areas where scuffles, fights, even murders happen occasionally. In the resultant chaos, students -- along with their families -- have to stay away from their homes for days on end. This makes such children fall behind in class, as well as making them more prone to violence themselves.

In other words, when a child, made reticent and withdrawn by temporary homeless and an environment of violence, acts differently from the rest of her peers in the classroom, the teacher sees in her a potential future trouble-maker instead of a scared and disoriented child. When this child is further administered firm discipline to make her conform to her peers' behaviour, then her difference may be suppressed for the time, but is her ability to learn and 'be normal' actually revived? There are teachers who think not:

The fear of punishment may even lead students to drop out of school. Today, the need is not for punishment, but for encouraging ways of teaching. So what if someone fails to learn the lesson? Instead of scolding or hitting them, we should acknowledge the effort they put into trying, and encourage them to try again. This method is actually more effective in my opinion – my students seldom make the same mistake again. But this is true that this profession requires a lot of patience. I would like to tell all my colleagues this: be a little more patient. If a student does badly in class, draw them closer, don't push them away. Encourage those who do well, so they can do even better, but pull the failing ones closest to your chest. If need be, sit next to them and explain the lesson to them on a one-on-one basis. If they see you care about them, they will find the courage to climb out of their fear and lack of confidence. And the less fearless they become, the better they will do.

This attitude, which we saw in most of the teachers, is an excellent change indeed. However, there are still a few who believe physical punishment is the only way to corral indifferent students into studying, that it is for their own good. We do not have enough public dialogue on this matter, but we should. Quite apart from a child's immediate suffering, supporters of corporal punishment must also keep in mind the long-term effort such violence has on a child's psyche. A child who is slapped today for a misdeed might accept that he deserved it. But as he grows older, he might feel entitled to slap someone else when they displease him. The mentality that approves of violence in small degrees is structurally the same as the mentality that approves of violence on a larger scale. So teaching a child that a slap is an appropriate response to perceived misdemeanour is opening the way for him to get into fights and perhaps even greater violence later in life. Adults who feel the impulse to discipline children 'for their own good' and 'for the greater good' must keep in mind what repercussions their action might have on the child's – and our society's – future choices.

Child Health and Schooling

Rural primary schools are mostly attended by children from very poor families. Most of them do not get two square meals a day. Coming to school neatly dressed is akin to luxury for them. Indeed, one teacher writes his students can either be seen in dirty clothes, or without a shirt. Of course, we do not expect that children will come to school in new clothes every day, but one can teach them the basics of personal hygiene. This is precisely what some teachers are doing. Coochbehar's Preetam Kundu writes that gradually, he has been able to instil the habit of regular bathing, cutting their nails, combing their hair and so on in his students. They have embraced these practices to the extent that they can now point out each others' lapses in hygiene. Debabrata Bhattacharya from North Dinajpur writes:

I saw that 80% of the children were filthy, and suffering from various kinds of skin infections. My work was cut out for me. I went to the student's homes and to the fields to talk to their parents, and advise them on personal and community hygiene. I have done this continuously for a year and a half now. The infections that were so widely spread earlier can now be found in only about 3% - 5% of the students.

This is a huge achievement, but such efforts also need support from local healthcare institutions. This is especially true for areas like Maldah, where arsenic in groundwater is a very big health hazard. Biswaroop Sarkar writes, 'Even though the area is poisoned with arsenic, groundwater is still our recourse. There is a PHE water line, but supply is unpredictable. As a result, most of my students are poisoned by arsenic'. Nayan Dutta from Purulia writes:

The village does not have toilets. The local people use the empty fields or the edges of water bodies instead. The same water bodies are used for bathing. As a result, communicable water-borne diseases rule supreme, and the children suffer from constant illnesses and anaemia. One such water body is located right behind our school and its edges are filthy and smelly.

The local panchayats can be crucial to the solving of such serious but localised problems. Along with that, both preventive and curative healthcare at the village level must be improved. But it is also true that teachers, by consistently teaching their students and their parents about better hygiene, can bring about a significant change in the health indicators of the community. Using the toilet instead of going to the fields, washing one's hands with soap before and after meals, cleaning up after oneself – these are practices that stay with forever after they have instilled in them as a child. And from each child, the good habits can slowly spread to their families and to the next generation. If teachers across the state begin teaching these habits to their students, then it can certainly be hoped that they will bring about a great positive social change. Already the mid-day meal programme has helped schools contribute substantially to the problem of undernourishment amongst our children. This would be the next big step forward. Some teachers are already working towards this goal. Now if it can be universalised to all schools, it might be the key that unlocks our collective development.

School Administration

Amongst the many matters discussed by the teachers during our workshops was the matter of school inspection. Proper and regular inspection is closely related to the development of a school. However, very few teachers brought the matter up in their writings. It is possible that inspection has become so weak and infrequent that they have become invisible even to those who are involved in the daily processes of our primary school system. Out of the 348 teachers who submitted write-ups, only 17 (that is, 5 percent) have touched upon the school inspection in school, and most of these are chronicles of personal experiences with inspectors. They all agreed that the inspection system is weak and inadequate. At the same time, they all also agreed that it is a vital part of the schooling system, and must be strengthened if the public education system is to develop. The level of irregularity of school inspections can be understood from the writings of this teacher from North Dinajpur. He writes: ‘The school that I have been teaching has *never* been inspected by the school inspector or anybody else’.

The surveys conducted at primary school level also point to this inadequacy. The Pratichi Trust’s 2008-09 survey shows that almost 55% schools have not been inspected in the six months prior to the date of survey, and 27% schools had not been inspected in the preceding one year.¹ In teachers’ writings, we see that one of the major reasons that this indifference is lack of adequate number of school inspectors. Damodarpur Free Primary School’s teacher – located in the South 24 Paraganas – ‘The person who is now the school inspector of the Karanjali Circle has to, in reality, look after four different Circles. In Karanjali Circle itself, there are 276 schools. Although my school is located within 1.5 kilometres of the motorway and from the Abara

¹ Pratichi Education Report-2, Pratichi (India) Trust, Delhi and Kolkata, 2009, 2010.

Primary School [where the inspector is assigned], in the last two years my school has been inspected only once’.

Of course, while pointing out the lapses encouraged by lack of inspection; a few teachers have also blamed the attitudes of some of their peers. A teacher from Murshidabad writes, ‘The lions’ share of our teachers are responsible, however a few tend to truncate their responsibilities. I would say the lack of inspection helps in the spread of this disease. Say you’re a responsible teacher, holding classes till four in the afternoon. However, you see that the teacher of the school next to yours declaring holiday at 2.30 every day. If you realise that there is no one to catch this discrepancy in teachers’ functioning, then after a few days, you too will feel like being negligent yourself. This is how such habits take root. Therefore an inspection system must be in place to check such tendencies’. Another teacher says that is the individual inspectors are not dutiful, then a strong system is of little use. He writes:

Inspectors very seldom visit primary schools. Even when they do come, their inspection is limited to examining the school’s various documents, accounts, records of attendance for teachers and students and the evaluation records. Very rarely do they come into the classrooms. When they do, they come in, take a look around and come out again. There is no discussion about the problems the teachers might be facing in the day-to-day running of the school. Occasionally, there is a tendency to emphasise the flaws of the head-teacher, or the other various teachers of the school.

To make school inspection an effective instrument in the delivery of education, what is required is making the role of the inspectors one of bridging the gap between different levels of the institution. On one hand, she should evaluate a school and find out it’s various problems and faults, but on the other, her responsibility will also be to listen to the various complaints that the teachers and students might have, take into account the various poverties of the schools, and bring these to the attention of higher authorities so that they may be addressed at the soonest. Unfortunately, going by the accumulated opinions of the teachers, this model has not been successfully implemented. In fact, to fulfil the weakness of the inspection system, the ‘shikshabondhu’ or ‘education-friend’ system was put in place. This, teachers feel, was not a success, as most shikshabondhus were more intent on supervising the teachers and gaining authority over them than facilitating the process of learning.

Problems at a higher level

In an earlier subsection we have seen how an inefficient distribution of teachers has resulted in a skewed pupil-teacher ratio, and the discrimination that has created. From the information provided by teachers, we see that in the South 24 Paraganas, Dhopath Deenbondhu Free Primary School has 101 students and 6 teachers, making the pupil-teacher ratio (PTR) 17:1, where in the same district, Khakurdaha Jungalia Primary School has 478 pupils and only 3 teachers, resulting in a PTR of 159:1. Similarly, Purulia's Palma Primary School has 113 students and 6 teachers (PTR 19), whereas Lakshmandihi Primary School's 150 children have only 2 teachers (PTR 75).

This problem is not peculiar to South 24 Paraganas or Purulia; they are widespread over each of West Bengal's districts. Maldahhh's Chirohori Primary School's PTR is 11 (64 students and 6 teachers), but Bablabona Primary School's is 129 (257 students and 2 teachers). Jalpaiguri's Shikarpur Rammohan Junior Basic School's 120 children have 6 teachers, making it's PTR 17, but Redbank Tea Garden Primary School's 217 children have only 3 teachers, pushing PTR up to 72. So the problem of high PTR is not merely a question of paucity in total available teachers. It is also a result of their poor distribution.

There is also the question of problems in the process of recruitment of teachers. A few teachers from the Jalpaiguri district have written about discrepancies and mismatches between their teaching capabilities and their postings. Sambit Pal, for example, was first assigned to a Hindi-medium school, even though he was not equipped to teach in that medium. Another teacher says that when he first joined FaNskonda Tea Garden Primary School – a Hindi medium school – in 2006, he saw that his only colleague was a teacher who had only been trained to teach in the Bengali medium. Although most such instances of maldistribution occur in Jalpaiguri, the stray incident also takes place in other districts. Angshik Das from North Dinajpur writes:

My home is in the centre of the town of Raiganj, but I was assigned to a school in a remote village 55 kilometres away... the commute was very hard on me... after reaching school I would often see the rate of attendance is 2 to 5 students... if someday we managed to cajole about 10 to 15 students then a new problem would start... the medium

of instruction was supposed to be Urdu... so I would be stuck in a dilemma. For the first few days, upon reaching school I just wanted to cry in frustration.

So we see that the problem in teacher distribution does not only discourage children from coming to school, it also demoralises teachers to the extent that their will to teach might gradually become non-existent.

As there appears to be no clear, established system that dictates teacher assignment, there is a build-up of resentment against it amongst teachers. Almost every teacher attending the workshop had complaints against their current postings. Maldahh's 34 year-old teacher Anirban Bhattacharya from Harishchandrapur Junior Basic School writes that the school to which he was first assigned took a 38 kilometre commute by bus, and a further 4 kilometre of unmetalled muddy road on foot. During the monsoons, this last stretch became unwalkable. In 2007, when he joined his current school as head-teacher, the problem of distance remained; this school is 44 kilometres from his home. Rajkumar Saha from Jalpaiguri tells us that his school is 55 kilometres from his home, across a hilly stream. During the rains, this streams rises and a strong current makes crossing difficult. The volume of complaints – apart from the teachers' own words – are a clear indication of how demotivating and morale-destroying a long or unsafe commute to work can be. The current way to combat this problem is to take up residence close to one's school. But the dominant feeling amongst teachers seemed to be that 'we should all be posted to schools close to our homes'. If one section of the teachers manage to procure this benefit – and they do – then why should the others not have it too? The only solution to this feeling of persecution or indifference is to put in place a transparent, rational system by which teachers are assigned, such that the primary consideration in the process is the nature of teacher-requirement in each school.

Participating teachers have also attracted our attention to the administration's role in a few other matters, such as the delivery of textbooks, money for the mid-day meal and other related matters, syllabi and so on. These have been discussed elsewhere in the text. But a vital element of the spread of education in society – people's participate in the education process – still lacks serious discussion in the public sphere. We shall talk about it in the next chapter.

The Role of People

Just like a school does not achieve completeness without the active participation of both teachers and students, similarly, without the active participation of parents, guardians and other members of society, a school cannot reach its desired goals. In one of the chapters before this, we have highlighted the various administrative lacks that teachers have highlighted in their writings during our workshops. But these complaints have not been able to connect themselves with the broader social picture. As a result, the social movement that could have grown out of teachers' demands for equity and empowerment at the village level did not succeed. The hierarchical system of education in our society ensures that teachers live with the dominance of the administrators while the parents live under the social dominance of the teachers. This imbalance of power in the relationship alienates one group from the other.

Although our workshops focused only on the teachers, we can see this problem reflected in their writings.

187 teachers had discussed their interactions with parents. Out of them, 116 play the same tune: 'Parents are not aware, they don't understand the importance of an education, if we try to include them by calling parent-teacher meetings they don't come'. A teacher from South 24 parganas writes, 'Many times the parents don't even know which class their child studies in. As a result, the child-teacher-parent linkage breaks down'.

A teacher from Murshidabad writes, 'It's amazing to see that there are still such parents who have not even kept the birth certificate of their most recent child carefully, even when the child is as young as two or three years old. They don't bother to send even visibly school-age children to school'.

It is a big problem when parents cannot produce the birth certificate of their children. However the teacher who belongs to the upwardly mobile class should keep in mind that the mother she is talking about has not had the benefit of an education.

A dominant complaint is that parents are indifferent towards their own child's education. A teacher from Maldahh records his experience, 'A student of Class 3 often absented himself from school. One time, he was absent continuously for a really long period. His house was 1 km from the school. I went over to his house to enquire about him. Upon reaching, I met the child's mother. Searching high and low, the boy was found in the fields. I even sent for the child's father. When I asked the family why their son didn't go to school, the mother said, the child wants to go to school but his father does not let him. He says, what good will an education do?' This is a reality with which most of us are familiar. Because of the way society is structured, a large section of our population is forced to live in circumstances where despite hard work, even a daily meal is not assured. It is not surprising that their priorities will not be the same as the priorities of the educated middle-class. And yet, even amongst people 'like this', the desire for educating their children has grown in leaps and bounds. Teachers themselves tell us this. For example, a teacher from Jalpaiguri writes:

The parents of many of my students work in the tea estates as a couple. Before going to work, they tell their children to go to school on time. After coming back from work, they ask their children what happened in school that day and what new lessons they learnt. This convinces those children that they must keep the day's lessons in mind, or they won't be able to repeat it to the parents. I even have such students in Class 3 who often tell me 'Sir I have already told my father this story, please set us a new story for classwork today'.

Another teacher from Murshidabad writes:

When the mothers didn't come to the first few MTA meetings, we asked them why. On their advice, the next meetings were held between 2:30 and 3:30 in the afternoon. Each time they have been invited by a printed letter. This resulted in considerably higher attendance.

These exceptional experiences clearly demonstrate that if teachers take the initiative, parents offer both their response and active support. But the problem is that the act of taking the initiative has been left entirely to the teacher's goodwill. Schools which have a sincere and responsible teacher benefit from the participation of the local people, and other schools do not. The chief reason behind this is that in the administrative scheme of things, the participation of people has been reduced to a mere ceremony. VEC, MTA, etc. have been established but there is very little effort to keep them active and lively. Samarendranath Mishra, who teaches at Nutangram Balika School at Purulia expresses doubt about the committees doing any work at all. To support his doubt, he says that in his experience these committee members are almost always absent from important school meetings. Jalpaiguri's Somnath Sarkar tells us that the VEC associated with his school takes no interest in it because their children don't study in this school. He says that all his students come from a different locality which falls under the purview of a different VEC. Tapash Kumar Koyal, who teaches at Nebutala Ramratanpur Lower Basic School in the South 24 Parganas write:

There is a VEC and a supervisory committee to oversee the running of the school. The majority of the committee members do not possess the capability to understand education, the school or the minds of the children. They cannot provide any advice about improving teaching and learning methods or the school's infrastructure. Most of the time, their quarrels with teachers succeed only in hampering the educational environment of the school.

A teacher from Laskarpur in the same district says, 'Our local Member of Parliament has been using the school compound to store extra bricks. She said she was going to hold a meeting to decide whether the school could use those bricks for building purposes. Recently she has informed us that since election dates have been announced, the matter will only be resolved after they take place. Just the other day, one of our students fell on the brick and cut his head open. So now we have to be extra careful during lunch hour to make sure our children are not hurt'. Several teachers have also complained that members of these committees are only interested about the financial aspects of running the school. As one of them puts it, 'The VEC/WEC members only show an interest in the school when grants for building additional classrooms

arrive. Most of the time, they want to get the supply contractors themselves, if the head-teacher does not immediately comply, they pressurise him or her’.

The points that emerge from these writings is that although the committees are charged with helping the teachers, aiding the growth of education, and maintaining the school, their members ignore these responsibilities in favour of keeping the teachers under different kinds of pressure, harassing them, and trying to establish a relationship of dominance over them. Political rivalry also enters the equation sometimes: If a teacher belongs to or supports a political party different from that which dominates the committees, committee members constantly attempt to harass the teacher.

All hope is not lost however. There have been positive experiences also, although only 15 teachers have reported such incidents. Bhabatosh Sarkar, who teaches at Jalpaiguri’s Goyerkata Grilled Mission Primary School mentions that the VEC members used to visit the school and keep in touch with the teachers. Madhusudan Adhikary from Coochbehar has also spoken of supportive VEC members who actively tried to resolve problems that he was facing in the school.

Similar dissonances can be seen in the teachers’ relationship with the community. Teachers like Arup Baran Dutta and Aditya Ranjan (both from Jalpaiguri) have written about the love and support they have received from their students and their parents. Other teachers have mentioned how villagers insist on their presence at every social function. On the other hand, there are teachers with bitter experiences - who have been forced to contribute towards local celebrations or ceremonies with which he or she has no personal ties.

The question here is why should there be such differences in experience between the same two or three groups of people. Or rather, why should there be unpleasant relationships between the teachers, parents and committee members where all of them share the same goal - a better school and the development of primary education? One reason indicated earlier is that hierarchical nature of our society where one group always wields power on another group. The other matter is probably this: the VEC and other committees are constituted without consulting the teachers; and their powers and functions are also decided without their input. This makes the teacher feel

excluded. They cannot look upon the committees as their allies. On the other hand, teachers are also alienated from school administration. This alienation is further strengthened by the inadequate conditions in which many of them have to work. The bitterness that this creates in them is sometimes reflected in their condescending attitudes towards the parents (who are mostly poor and illiterate). But this situation is by no means unavoidable. The writings collected during this workshop provide excellent examples to the contrary. And if one teacher can do it, so can the others.

Self-analysis and the Way Ahead

Even three decades back in West Bengal, teaching in a primary school was considered an “untouchable” profession, financially.¹ Talking to teachers from those times, it becomes apparent that choosing school-teaching as a profession was not spurred by the desire for a comfortable life, but a wish to educate the illiterate, and empower them socially. Money was of course a necessity, as it always is, but life centred chiefly on ideals and ideologies. This worldview was reflected in the principles of the teachers’ unions. Going back to 1935, we see the All Indian Primary Teachers’ Association declaring that its chief aim was to improve the infrastructural provisions of the primary education system not the salary structure (Back then that was the only existing teachers’ union).² Lately, the question of inflation, expenditure and satisfactory remuneration has come to dominate public conversations about most things; education is no exception. However, it is heartening to see that even in such an environment, a vein of the old ideological inspiration amongst certain teachers continue to exist. Swapan Mukhopadhyay, who has just retired from North Dinajpur, writes ‘When I first received my appointment letter, I was very happy because in my heart, I had nurtured the hope of becoming a teacher most of all. I can still recall how, in 1969, a friend and I had decided that we would set up a school in the village of Firozpur -- five kilometres from Raiganj -- because there were no primary schools in that village’. The devotion to the teaching ideal was such that despite its meagre remunerations, he

¹ After the left front government came to power in West Bengal there was considerable improvement in the salaries of primary teachers.

² To understand this in detail refer to Pratichi Occasional Papers 3: Roles and responsibilities of the Teachers’ Union in the Delivery of Primary Education : A Case of West Bengal by Sarkar Manabesh and Kumar Rana, Pratichi (India) Trust Delhi 2010

had voluntarily chosen the profession, and had indeed made pedagogic plans even before embarking upon it. This enthusiasm for teaching has been transmitted across generations. Prasenjit Biswas from South 24 Paraganas writes, 'I joined a primary school in 1999. Earlier I was employed by the central government, but I chose to give it up and take up teaching instead, although at that I had to work hard at repressing the desire for promotions and high salaries [that a central government job would bring]'. In a nutshell, this is the history of primary school teachers in West Bengal. Despite many hindrances, an inherent desire to bring children into the light of learning has inspired generations of men and women to take up the challenge. In the earlier chapters, we have seen examples of such unselfish devotion that have smoothed the way for primary education when institutional help fell short.

A few teachers are of the opinion, however, that their profession is no longer the honourable, respectable vocation it once was. A teacher from Murshidabad writes, 'If a person does not feel genuine attachment to, and responsibility towards, the work he or she has undertaken, then the work can never be properly done. Amongst our current crop of primary teachers, one notices this checking-the-boxes mentality. I doubt they are capable of pouring themselves heart and soul into their work'. Similar feelings have been voiced by other teachers. A participant at the Alipurduar workshop has written, 'I have faced many difficulties during my years as a teacher... but the problem that I consider the most serious is the indifference with which some teachers treat their responsibilities towards their students. As a result we see indiscipline in schools, lack of proper pedagogic measures in the classroom, and so on. The student is not central to their idea of teaching'. A teacher from Baruipur writes, 'In the current environment, teaching is a *job*. It is no longer an exalted vocation. Thus the sincerity and love with which one rears one's own children to become a valued member of society is not extended to one's students in the school. A large chasm exists between the two'. In every workshop we have organised in this series, a few teachers have thus always questioned the responsibility and sincerity of their own ranks. (Though this questioning has remained absent in the write-ups of the *sahayikas* of Sishu shiksha kendras) According to their self-evaluation, it appears that teachers feel the greatest lapse of themselves and their peers lie in (a) adopting methods of joyful learning, (b) participating with sincerity in the teachers' training workshops organised by the school administration, (c) focusing on the efficacy of their classroom-delivery methods, and (d) punctuality.

Jalpaiguri's Tushar Sarkar writes 'Not all of us have been able to move beyond the traditional methods of teaching. The temperament to adapt is the biggest roadblock standing in the way of creating a joyful learning environment in the classroom'. Speaking of the lack of seriousness with which some teachers treat the training workshops, a write-up from Murshidabad claims that 'The participants arrive late, and their chief interest is in how quickly they can eat their lunch and go home'. Another teacher from Murshidabad writes, 'There is a tendency to shirk classes even amongst us teachers [although of course this does not apply to everyone]. Quite a few of us prefer to spend time in the school office rather than going to classes.' A teacher from Maldah touches upon the matter of punctuality: 'The day after I joined work, on 17 February, I reached school at precisely 10.45 AM and saw that children were doing as they pleased in the schoolyard – running about, playing, and being raucous. The school office, classroom and teachers' room had not been unlocked yet. At 11 AM, the teacher-in-charge arrived and upon seeing me exclaimed, 'You're already here!' This comment naturally disturbed me.' Some teachers have discovered a connection between such shirking of responsibility and higher education. According to them, it is the teachers with higher educational qualifications who are inattentive to their duties. Teaching, for them, is a way of earning a living, not a vocation they are emotionally committed to. Other teachers say they have seen similar lax attitude amongst rurally-assigned teachers who come from urban areas. That there is tension between one's own higher education and teaching at the primary level can be seen in the teachers' writings themselves, but laxity in responsibility appears not to be limited by the rural-urban divide. A teacher from Purulia – and a few others – have mentioned how easy it is to imbibe such tendencies from one's peers, and how, if unchecked, the attitude can become an enormous barrier to educational development. He writes, 'I took up my first position on 8th October 1988. In 1990, I was transferred to an adivasi school close by. The head-teacher of that school was in the habit of arriving late and ending classes by two o'clock. At first this made me uncomfortable, but later even I accepted this system because I needed time to study for my own higher education'. According to the Pratichi Trust's surveys conducted in 2001-02 and 2008-09, we see that the rate of teacher absenteeism has reduced somewhat. The teachers' write-ups show that neither has this problem spread among every one of them nor has it been eradicated totally. But a greater achievement is that the teachers themselves recognise flaws within their community and fight to put an end to them.

But there are reasons behind the teachers' lack of responsibility. The weakness of Government policies and some age old social beliefs which have taken deep roots are some of them. We have discussed in Chapter 4 how public policy and faulty implementation can cause infrastructural lapses which in turn generate a disinterest in teachers. From the discussion in the Chapter 5 it becomes clear how in the complex contemporary socio-political scenario of West Bengal has resulted in the gradual deterioration in the relationship between the teacher and the common man. This disturbed relationship has affected the teachers' responsibility towards his vocation. Apart from this some deep-rooted ideas within the teachers that give rise to this indifference also add up to this problem. We have noticed in Chapter 3 that some of the teachers' consider enrolment of 'first generation' learners from backward families unacquainted with basic alphabets as a serious problem. As a solution they suggest introducing pre-primary classes so that that the children start recognising the alphabets earlier. But according to the primary education council studies of Class 1 should begin with the alphabets. Therefore it is well understood this difference in idea inadvertently has its effect on the teachers' enthusiasm. Since the private schools run pre primary classes for children the teachers' idea receive a greater boost. Whatever be the reason or the supportive real life examples, we can never discard scientific truths. Some teachers' have stood against customs and adopted the scientific methods. They confirm that teaching and learning of first alphabets in primary school is undoubtedly possible.

It is not merely the question of having pre primary classes but modern methods of pedagogy, evaluation system and many more questions where the public policy and teachers' lock horns. Chapter 4 brings up some of the glimpses which showcase this dissonance. Apart from the ideas mentioned there are various reasons that demotivates a teacher. Out of 348 teachers, 55, i.e. almost 16% think that duties relating to the Mid-Day Meal or compiling DISE data comes in the way of fulfilling their duties as a teacher. At the same time, they agree that data compilation for the Mid-Day Meal and the DISE is necessary for the development of primary education in the state. So the problem here appears to be a gap between acknowledging what is good for primary education, and actually fulfilling those responsibilities so primary education benefits. In relation to this, we should also mention that we have noticed that not everybody has a homogenous idea of what the duties of a teacher should be. A teacher from Maldah writes that before he joined his school, his idea about being an educator was to merely explain textbooks to the students. After

joining work, his idea gradually expanded to include a greater set of responsibilities. However there are still few teachers who appear to believe that classroom delivery is the only responsibility of a teacher and responsibility which exists beyond this such as identifying children ready for school, supervising the enrolment process, or the day-to-day functioning of the Mid-Day Meal programme are excess responsibilities that are being imposed upon them by inconsiderate policymakers. If this attitude persists, then what this will result in further reluctance in the part of the teachers' fulfil these duties.

Particularly relevant to our discussion on the dissonance between new pedagogic methods, administrative policy and the teachers' own opinions is the matter of parental involvement. We have noticed in the previous chapters that a section of the teachers firmly believe that a parents' responsibility does not end with ensuring their child goes to school every day, it has to include a daily supervision of a child's learning and making sure that the child sits down every evening to revise the day's lesson and so on. This opinion immediately puts at a disadvantage those children who are marked as 'first generation learners', because their unlettered parents are in no position to help them with their studies at home. So if a teacher believes that part of the responsibility of a student becoming educated is the parents', then there is a very great chance of such children falling behind in the classroom of such teachers'. This attitude might actually increase the gap between the literate and the illiterate, instead of bridging it.

In this regard, we may discuss the teachers' perception about parental responsibilities. As we have noticed earlier that one portion of teachers feels that parents' responsibility is not merely restricted to sending their children to school but they must make an effort to make them study at home. It is evident that the first generation learners receive no such help from their parents so they are under high risk to remain backwards. This parent-dependant system of learning results in the teacher's indifference towards the first generation learners which may cause a dangerous setback in their learning process. So we notice that a difference in concepts and ideas can play a very important role in the success of a particular teacher in a particular school, and in the larger scale of things, the existence of different ideas about the role of teachers and the role of schools in child development can determine whether public primary education in the state will scale heights, will stagnate, or even regress in a few areas. The positive aspect that we have noticed is that many teachers recognise this and they especially recognise the importance of primary

education even if they admit that they are incapable of encouraging their students to go on to secondary education after they complete the primary level. Asim Kumar Das from Maldah writes, 'I'm very proud to have turned the children in my locality towards the school. It's true that we have not been able to reach the ideal level of educational excellence in the school, but we have been able to eradicate illiteracy to a very large extent'. This confidence and this ability to focus on the positive that comes out of their dedication to a particular community and a particular school; is in our opinion, a very big achievement for the teacher, and the dissemination of such opinions within the teaching community might inspire those teachers who might feel otherwise discouraged with their working conditions. At the beginning of this chapter, we have seen examples of people such as Prasenjit Biswas who have sacrificed their own personal interests in the altar of greater social and national good and have therefore joined the primary education system. During the course of this workshop, we have encountered several more teachers who are very aware of the full extent of their responsibilities, their own past and current shortcomings, and the various ways in which they can overcome the same. We have also seen people who admit they have been bad examples themselves or have been influenced by the bad examples of their colleagues. To balance them, we have also encountered teachers who have actively resisted the spread of such bad influence, and made a personal effort to set a better example. A teacher from Purulia writes:

The day I first joined as a teacher, I came to know that the school was not opened regularly. The other teacher was kept busy by his own personal interests and did not concentrate enough on the school. The two new teachers at the school, my new colleague and I decided that first of all, we must open the school every day and on time. We visited the parents and encouraged them to send their children to school every day. After doing this for some time, we have finally succeeded in our goal - making the school at least a place which is open every day, and the children come to it.

Another teacher from North Dinajpur writes of a similar experience, turning a bad situation into a hopeful one:

The day that I first reached my new school, I almost started crying seeing the condition that it was in. It was a room with a tin roof. The doors and windows were broken. A few children were playing in front of the school. The only teacher in the school apart from me had not been able to come to school that day because there was a meeting at the school inspector's office. The place made me feel like I was a single

person in an open desert, and actually, the dream that I had within was that there would be little children all eager to absorb the education and we will be able to spread the light of learning in them... The real fight that I had to fight was within me. Within three months of my joining, the head-teacher retired. I was all alone... I decided that no matter what I had to do, this was a school that I had to establish properly.

This temperament of inheriting a less than adequate schooling conditions and becoming determined to make it better still exists in several teachers and they are passing it on to their colleagues and peers. There are still teachers who acknowledge the added social responsibility that comes with their job and are indeed proud to accept it. It is our experience that despite occasional discouragements, this is the feeling that dominates most teachers' attitude towards their work. As a result we see writings like that of Jalpaiguri's Dipankar Roy, who writes:

Actually I had never consciously thought that I would take up teaching as a profession. However, under current conditions, where choosing a respectable profession and sticking to that goal becomes incredibly difficult, then grabbing any job that comes one's way is the only recourse. But one must realise that teaching is not just any other job. The scope of its influence is much larger... 'I am a teacher', this feeling constantly reminds me to take my job more seriously, it reminds me of the many social responsibilities that come attached to it, and this actually makes me proud. I know that teaching no longer exists within the bracket of desirable professions. However, the label that 'teachers are responsible for installing a strong spine in our future citizens' is forever. This realisation keeps telling me that I am not like my five other neighbours, I am a teacher and fulfilling my job well sets me apart.

If teachers are allowed to spread this confidence, goodwill and determination beyond the scope of their individual schools to the entire teaching community and beyond, then it can inspire other people, and it can indeed begin a social movement which will benefit all aspects that are related to the spread of primary education. It is true that in our collected write-ups, we have come across certain prejudices and certain problems, but a greater truth is that we have discovered a wealth of excellence in our teachers and a desire to examine themselves and improve their functioning. It is this excellence and this desire that shall become our inspiration in the way forward.

Nabaneeta Sarkar
Rampara R. R. Primary School
Maldah

Our school is in a village, a mere 20-30 minutes away from the city – almost a suburb. The environment is quite good. The day I joined the school, I discovered that ‘the school’ really meant one room with a tin roof, and a big veranda in front of it. I’ll be honest: I was disappointed. I had hoped to teach at a beautiful school. But this was back in 2005. It has been six years since then. That old room has gradually become a favourite of mine. Later, three new classrooms were made with the aid of the DPEP and SSA, but it is still the old room that attracts me. Anyway, that was about my first impression of the school building. Upon entering the classroom, large eyes stared at me with intense curiosity. An alien couldn’t have commanded a closer scrutiny. Some of them were clutching packets of puffed rice, other holding slates and pencils. After introductions and a friendly chat, it was decided that my name would be the ‘new didimoni’ (female teacher). I became quite an attraction for them, probably because I was new. But I’ve tried to hold on to this attraction later, when I stopped being new. What I have given these children is traditional and prescribed a matter of form. But what I have received from them helps me walk the path of life more easily. They have indeed enriched me.

I have noticed that when I enter a classroom, everybody stands up to welcome me. This custom has been handed down the generations. They try to imitate my most insignificant mannerisms. For example, during roll-call I pronounce ‘4’ and ‘7’ differently from the local students. After writing on it, I clean the blackboard with my left arm. They notice and try to follow these things, even though I never ask them to. That feels very nice.

I get wonderful responses in the English class. In the other classes a child occasionally says, ‘Miss, isn’t it time for tiffin?’, but never in the English class. They don’t even notice time passing. I don’t always succeed, but I try my best. Different problems and lacks prevent me from fulfilling my wishes for these students. Let us come to classes 3 and 4. They refuse to hear even a single Bangla word in the English class. It’s not that they are all excellent students of English. Some of them cannot speak the language at all. But even those students revel in being able to understand my short sentences or instructions in English, and acting upon them. I am bound to teach the class in English from the moment I enter it till I leave, and there is no dearth of excitement and enthusiasm from their side. All they lack is good guidance.

A very helpful technique I’ve learnt from the workshops is group work. It has yielded good results for me. In the maths class, when some students do not understand certain things, I divide the class into groups, and let the better students teach the others in their groups. The students who could not understand something earlier pick it up very quickly then. This actually surprises me. I sometimes wonder whether children have a separate language that we – or at least I have grown out of.

Towards the beginning of my teaching years, I was teaching students to read the clock. I drew a circle on the wall and with two thin sticks, explained how a clock shows the time. One of my students, Binoy Chaudhuri, learnt the process so quickly and well that at home that day, I speculated how he would have turned out had he been born into a better-off household. He is now a student of Class 9.

Another time, I was standing at the school verandah, when I saw the children playing by lifting sand out of a hole. They had designed a little crane-like tool for this with bamboo pieces, a small tin, and a pole. I was amazed at this skill and creativity. It is our fault that we do not know how to encourage this thinking or nurture it.

To be very honest, no matter how enthusiastic we are about teaching, every now and then, faced with all our problems, we give up and go with the flow. Why else would our children suffer such awful conditions? This is a matter that all of us must reflect upon individually and honestly. Our students can have perfectly coherent conversations with friends, they can understand the rules of

a new game perfectly, they can narrate tale of having seen a ghost once. The only thing they don't understand is their lessons! Why is this so? It is so because the moment something is 'studies', they approach it differently, not how they approach everything else. This is especially true of history and geography. Given this, we are bound by responsibility to make textbooks as interesting as we can.

There are some rules that I have given up and made compromises with, for instance, forty-minute lessons or finishing the syllabus on time. But it is far more important to see how much a student has learnt, not how much he has been taught. If learning takes fifteen more days, so be it. But if I stick to this belief, I will not be able to finish the syllabus on time. This is one of the main impediments in our teaching and learning process.

An even bigger problem is the fact that many children are already taught a lot of things before they enrol in schools, and most of it is incorrect. Let us take writing. The ways in which most children are taught to write Bangla vowel and consonant letters are wrong. A lot of our classroom-time is spent in correcting these, and then teaching them the correct way. And as we all know, making a child unlearn and then learn is far harder than merely making them learn. Pocket cards and blackboards help a lot in the process.

Another matter I must mention is the effect of using drawing and pictures. Difficult subjects become much more accessible when we draw on the board, and it also makes the class far more interesting for children. The response I get in class when I use pictures brings me great satisfaction. The children's only laziness is in reading books. We can make them do everything, except study from a textbook. So we must try and educate them in ways that appeal to them. I know this is not always possible, but what's the harm in trying our best?

Finally, I want to conclude with a story: that day in Class 4's science lesson the teacher was teaching 'the structure of a rohu fish'. After drawing a picture of the fish with its bony skeleton on the board, the teacher said, 'When we have this fish at home, we pick out the bones and eat'. A lively boy called Rakesh Choudhuri immediately stood up and said, 'But when I eat fish I pick *out* the bones and throw them away. Why do you eat the bones, Miss?' This is how quick and

witty our children are. Our work is clear. To teach them, we must first make ourselves be like them.

Mohammad Hefjur Rahaman
Faridpur Primary School
Maldah

Naseema Khatun studies in Class 4. ‘Studies’ is probably an exaggeration. For the first three months of the academic year she has sat at the back of the classroom, head hanging low over her chest. When her turn came, she couldn’t read from the text. I realized she hasn’t learnt the alphabets. For the next three days I tried teaching her the alphabets. I failed. Finally in my irritation, I behaved in a very un-teacherlike fashion. ‘Why do you come to school?’ I asked her. ‘You would do much better to stay at home and do domestic chores’. At the very next moment, I realised I had been unjust. Before leaving class that day, I asked two of her neighbouring classmates to teach her the alphabets. The next day, she had learnt two of the first four vowel-alphabets. I said, ‘Very good! See how well you’ve learnt these? Excellent. You can do this so well. Why were you frightened, then? If you try, you can do even better than this’. Immediately, her anxious, fearful dark face lit up from within. Her very gait changed, became lively and confident. By the next day, she had learnt all the vowel-alphabets. Within the next fifteen days, she has mastered the consonants and started reading words, then sentences. At the end of the academic year, she concluded her Class 4 studies very satisfactorily.

Using the technique I employed in Naseema’s case, I have since managed to bring many ‘backward’ children up to par in the classroom. Every time I succeeded, I have felt an almost bottomless joy.

Hasanujjaman of Class 3 was a very irregular student. When I asked him why, he answered that he has to scout for mango leaves for his mother – dried leaves serve as fuel at his home – then take his father’s lunch to the fields. I spoke to his mother about this. His mother said she wished her son helped as he said he did, but he usually does what he likes, and is seldom available for help around the house. Her neighbour confirmed her story. Whatever might be the actual cause,

the truth is that several of my students are irregular, like Hasanujjaman. ‘This can never work’, I thought to myself. ‘In our poor country, poverty is the biggest hurdle to education’. Later, I rethought my approach. A meeting with students’ mothers was organised, in which I discussed their role in their children’s education. The reaction was unexpectedly encouraging. I gave one mother per neighbourhood certain responsibilities regarding the local children’s attendance. The result was a dramatic improvement. [This happened before Mother-Teacher Committees were made mandatory].

It was 1998-99. We were two teachers, handling four classes. Students were almost 350 in number. Each of us could stay in one class at a time, leaving two other classes unattended. The loud happiness of these unattended children almost evicted us from the school grounds sometimes. To resolve this, I handed the responsibility of one class to my colleague Mohammad Moinudding sahib, my elder, and took the responsibility of the other three upon myself. If I had to teach one class, I gave one of the others a writing assignment, and the second one something to read. I picked monitors for each class, and gave the responsibility to teaching to the better students of the class, merely acting as their guide myself. Every now and then, I would divide the children into assignment-based or village-based groups, and organise quizzes for them. Studies progressed happily. By the end of the year, student achievements were quite satisfactory. Thinking back on those days makes me happy even today. Using those techniques, I still get good results.

Some children can read, but not write. After much effort I got some results, but not according to my expectations. Looking for the cause, I realised there were errors in my effort. I was teaching them how to write in my own way, not in the tried and tested method recommended by the Class 1 textbooks ‘Learning to Write’ segment. I changed my approach, and got good results.

It was a morning in the middle of May 2011. I was teaching Class 1. The previous night I had stayed up watching an IPL match. Sleep-deficiency was making me lethargic. I wanted to stretch and rest. Suddenly I remembered that the daily labourers all around me work much harder all day for far smaller pay. They must feel even more unwell during their days of hard work, but they have no chance for resting a while. In contrast, I get paid much more for far less physical effort. If they can work through a hard day, why can't I? My lethargy disappeared. A 'can do' attitude revived me both mentally and physically. With happiness and satisfaction I finished that period, and that school day.

Bhaluara Primary School's headmaster Abhay Mishra's farewell was about to begin. He would be coming from a neighbouring village. The parents and other people of this remote, Muslim-majority backward area had lined the streets, forming an almost one kilometre long human chain. To me, this was almost unthinkable. There were tears in many eyes. I asked some of the local parents why they were showering such love on a retiring headmaster. They told me that Abhay Mishra would visit every single house on his way to the school, rousing children and urging them to go to school. On his way home, he would stop at every absentee student's house, enquire after them and tell their family about the importance of sending their children to school. This was his regular routine. Thus he has a personal, sympathetic relationship with the young and old of every house, be they men or women. That is why people were lining the streets to greet him. I thought to myself, Abhaybabu's teaching life was one hundred percent successful.

Srabani Saha
39, Lalgola High Madrasah Primary School
Murshidabad

It is my hand that the children of Lalgola – a village where India and Bangladesh are joined by the river Padma – hold as they take their first steps towards formal education. Enrolment should be completed between 5 and 7 years of age. Ninety percent of the enrolled children are first generation learners. But many parents do not record and cannot remember their exact date of birth (in this area, going to a hospital to deliver a child is a matter of luxury. The practice is

viewed with disbelief, embarrassment and fear). In instances where birth certificates are available, we see that children coming to school for the first time have already passed their ninth birthday. Legally, a Class 1 child should not be older than seven years. On the other hand, the children's parents beg and cajole me to enrol them. This is a dilemma I am caught in frequently. At another time, a child left school while in Class 2, and came back two years later to be readmitted. I don't know where to put children like these. In most cases, the child comes holding their mother, maternal grandmother, paternal grandmother or elder sisters' hand, because their fathers work abroad as construction workers. In at least 30 percent cases, the father doesn't come back. He starts a new family in his place of employment. On top of this, people in these border villages feel crime's persistent beckoning. As a consequence, several parents find themselves in jail. So when my seven-year old student, upon hearing about his friend's sunnat (circumcision ceremony), says he will have his sunnat too when his father comes back from prison, then the hope in his innocent eyes makes me feel lost and helpless. I forget my formal role as a teacher. When this child stops coming to school, I ask his mother to come see me. Tears in her eyes, she tells me that hunger and extreme poverty has forced her son to work in a brick kiln. From her lap and around her feet, little babies and toddlers look at me helplessly. In this way, several childhoods lose themselves in tea shops, mechanics' garages, or behind ice-cream carts. Their helplessness to change the situation is joined by mine.

This is one aspect of the situation. There are also children who do not suffer from these problems. They can come to school, remain in an environment of learning from 11 AM to 2 or 4 PM. Teachers try to improve their minds and spirits beyond the scope of traditional education. I am hopeful about this process. But this environment lasts them only a few hours. What happens after that? Where do they go back? They go back to an environment where at least two words in every ten are obscene, unfit to be heard. Small gambling circles meet regularly everywhere, which have the parents' implicit support. I have a very strange experience through which I came to know that nearly all the boys in Class 4 regularly gamble. When I informed the parents of this, they were quite annoyed with me. 'They gamble outside school hours, don't they?' was the response I got from them. What about the girls? Well, as it is they spend a lot of time at school, how will the family keep up if they don't go home and help their mothers make biri? [Biri is locally produced handmade cigarette, made by rolling rough-cut tobacco in dried leaves]

Anyway, we have to work our way through these problems. The primary school textbooks are products of deep and commendable thinking. The worksheets for Class 1 and 2 are especially rich in useful content. But they are frequently filled under the direction of alternative teachers (sometimes inaccurately) before we begin using them in class. The methods followed by these alternative teachers are completely unscientific, which makes us work on two levels: a preliminary ‘cleaning’, followed by an ‘implementation’ of our methods in their minds.

Thanks to laws and the media, teachers have been transformed into butchers. Is it very difficult to imagine that every teacher is somebody’s mother or father? Psychologists say that teachers beat up children as a way of expressing their mental instability and aggressiveness. Leaving a few unfortunate instances behind, I ask these experts; on who do the mental illnesses of people in other professions manifest them? Or are teachers the only people who are mentally ill? Today when, upon being mildly reprimanded for a wrong-doing, we hear a boy from Class 4 say that he will put his teacher in prison for it. Whose contribution is this thought process? Who has a ‘punishment’-free life? But we cannot say these things.

The social context has come up more prominently in my writing. Actually, lack of awareness amongst parents is a big deterrent for education. They find time to look for a lost slipper, but not the time to come to school to see how their children fared in the examinations. There are efforts to make them more aware. Perhaps we will reap the benefits in the not-too-distant future. But, can we make primary education residential? All children can then stay in the school and complete their education.

Saadikul Islam
Gokulpur Special Cadre Primary School
Maldah

Since the title of the workshop is ‘Documenting Experiences’, let me begin by saying that I have been employed for five years by the Maldah District Primary School Council. During this period I have had the opportunity to teach at three schools, and to enrich myself with the experience of participating in various workshops every year. Here, I shall write about the experiences I can recall.

‘He who critiques himself is truly wise’ – the Prophet Hajrat Mohammad.

I try my best to filter my everyday experiences through the lens of this sweet sermon. In my brief teaching life I have faced several hurdles. I have solved most of them by reflecting upon them, or discussing them with good people I know. A few problems and hurdles, however, remain unmoved.

On 17 February 2006, the day after I joined work, I reached my new school at 10.45 AM to see children running about the school compound willy-nilly, shouting and screaming in the course of their games. Classrooms, the administrative office and teachers’ room had not yet been unlocked. So I started introducing myself to the children and learning their names. Exactly at 11, the teacher-in-charge arrived and upon seeing me, said, ‘You’re already here?’ I was naturally a little disconcerted at this remark. On my way home, I kept wondering what time was the right time to be at school the next morning. Finally, I decided that this lax discipline must be combated. If I cannot even come to school at the right time, I will never be able to achieve anything. After a lot of effort, we have now been able to reach a satisfactory level of punctuality in the school. This has happened with the active encouragement of my colleagues.

The various classroom-problems observed widely are also present in my classes. A large part of my problem was the difference in language. Nearly all the people living close to the school speak in the local ‘khotta’ language [local Bengali colloquial for languages from the Bengal/Jharkhand/Bihar area that are closer to Hindi than to Bengali]. Their children have considerable difficulty understanding the spoken Bengali of the teachers and the formal Bengali of the text. Even after explaining things several times, most students fail to understand them. At one point, I began wondering if there was a way through this barrier at all. It appeared as insurmountable as the Great Wall of China. Then suddenly I remembered the old saying, ‘If you cannot change the atmosphere you have to change yourself’. So I began learning the ‘khotta’ equivalent of many common Bengali words, and started using these to explain things in the classroom. The results were amazing. This is a technique I still use, although my tendency to use it has diminished a little in scope.

Human beings are social creatures who live by certain rules. Schools are a part of this society. The basic rules of behaviour in the classroom, therefore, have been secured in the recesses of our memory. For example, standing up to acknowledge the teacher when he enters or leaves the classroom; taking permission before leaving the classroom if a teacher is present; if he is not present, then asking the class captain [monitor] for permission, and so on. Although these rules were in effect before I joined the school, there was a sense of disarray when I first arrived. After a discussion with my colleagues, we decided to observe these courtesies more comprehensively. Not all children are alike. Some of them are more scared of teachers than is necessary. Others do not even take teachers into account. Daily observance of these simple rules helps remove the resultant chaos, and awakens a sense of social belonging in these children. My attempt to do this for them continues till this day.

Another major problem in the classroom is the lack of progress amongst some students. The root of this disease is diverse, so I try to address it with counselling, using a variety of ways, like, discussing the matter with a child's parents to determine his or her particular cause, arranging for remedial lessons, etc.

I do not think work in any area ever comes to an end. So I must say that there are many barriers that we face daily, apart from the ones mentioned above, and we take what measures we can to overcome them. But I must conclude with this: if we try to sincerely overcome an obstacle, it can always be overcome, no matter how difficult it seems at first.

Neelakshi Dey Sarkar
Raninagar R. R. Primary School
Jalpaiguri

I have been teaching at Raningar Primary School for seventeen long years. Before that I taught in the Duars [a hilly, forested terrain in North Bengal] for nine years. Here I shall write about the experiences gathered in these twenty-six years.

While teaching children I have realised that the one thing needed most in the process of imparting everything we know to them is patience. If I lose my patience and show my frustration or annoyance, I will not be able to teach children anything.

All my students are my children; I have had to embrace them with the affection of a mother. They should not feel insecure with me. I must make it so they want to approach me of their own free will. Only then will I be able to teach them at least something.

While teaching, if my way of speaking is not good, if it is not sweet to their ears, then children do not feel encouraged to participate in the classroom. So I have had to keep in mind that my delivery is enjoyable and my language simple enough for children to follow easily.

Another important experience of mine has been that every child is imitative. It comes naturally to them. Which is why I had to be vigilant about my own behaviour – there was no room for mistakes in the way I behaved at school. My demeanour around children must always be pleasant and sweet.

Let me elaborate two small incidents from my twenty-six years experience as a teacher. When I taught at the Central Duars T.G. Primary School, most of my students were Nepali. It was a garden [local word for tea plantations] area. Quarters were a fifteen-minute walk away from the school. It was the month of July, heavy rains were frequent. One day the downpour began just as the school was about to start. By the time I reached school I was drenched; suddenly a boy from class II began requesting me earnestly to allow him to go home. I didn't want to let him go out in that rain, especially since he would not tell me why he wanted to go home. After much cajoling he finally confessed that he wanted to go home to 'luga lianu'; it means 'bring clothes'. The teacher was wet through, and so he wanted to go home in the rain to get dry clothes for her. This feeling that a small child showed towards me left a lasting impression on me.

Quite some time ago at a Raninagar school a few girls surrounded me after school was over; they didn't want to let me come back to the town where I lived. Why? Because, 'Didimoni, won't you stay at our house tonight? We want to study with you in the evening too'. That was very gratifying. Finally I thought I had been able to inspire them to want to study.

Subir Palit
Ghoramara Primary School
Jalpaiguri

My experience with teaching is not limited to the primary school where I teach. It first began in the arena of private tuition, now a banned activity for teachers. Of course in this case ‘teaching’ was limited to merely helping someone learn how to read, write and understand bits of text.

I personally feel that teaching does not remain limited to increasing someone’s reading, writing, listening, speaking and understanding skills. There is a certain ideology or mark that sets human beings apart from other animals; to help people acquire this, or make it blossom in people is what teaching is all about. Whoever learns has these skills latent inside them, and a teacher’s true work is to awaken them from their sleep within each child.

Of course these discussions are irrelevant here. The current workshop’s aim is to record the experiences acquired while teaching at primary schools.

My life as a primary teacher first began in July of 2000, at Jhar Matiani Primary School at Nataguri. The school was five kilometres away from the bus stop. I had to walk there. On my first day at this remote place there were about eighty to ninety students present in the school. There were three teachers, counting me. Most students were bare foot; some of them were bare-bodied. Only a handful had bathed before coming to school. By two o’clock, the school was empty since a hungry stomach does not follow the rules of the school. The Mid-day Meal programme hadn’t started yet. During the rains most students became skeletal. There was a general environment of ill-health and undernourishment which killed any attempts to teach and learn. After this, I was transferred permanently to Moulali’s Harisabha Primary School.

One day at school I saw builders at work; a Mid-day Meal kitchen was being built. After this the sound of pots and pans and the aroma of steaming rice filled the school courtyard. It felt like a feast. Another day, a huge vehicle arrived at the school. Rig-boring for a source of drinking water had been ordered. The children had the right to pure drinking water. I too was relieved of the burden of carrying water from home. After the first euphoria was over, we realised that the Mid-day Meal programme had become a burden to the teachers the same way as the old man in

the fairytale had become a burden to Sindbad. Many teachers puffed and panted under it. However, the children smile and glow of new health didn't escape our attention either. After this it became imperative to pay greater attention to the quality of education and teaching-time. On a full stomach, children prefer to stay at school rather than go home. From the various workshops organised by the Sarva Shiksha Mission, we gradually learnt how classroom teaching could be accomplished even without textbooks using various teaching aids. The new English teaching methods especially are particularly impressive.

Reluctant workers such as me are forever on the lookout for opportunities to shirk work. Despite offering such excuses as 'It doesn't work', 'It is not possible', I have seen, after secretly implementing some of these methods, that these do actually work. The question then arises about my own sincerity and sense of responsibility; how aware am I about these things? In my own consciousness has teaching children ever been as important as the structure of the pay-scale? Have I ever successfully been able to identify my students with my own children? Very recently, a conversation conducted during my work for the recent census brought these questions to the fore. In the middle of the afternoon, in the intense heat, the small rural house I arrived at turned out to belong to my student Bhim. He resembled the mythological Bhim, not in body but in brains. Bhim's mother was working in the fields; she came running when she heard we had arrived. She brought dried rice and little mounds of sugar in sparkling metal plates. Clear cool water came in tall glasses. When we were leaving she touched her forehead to the ground to show respect and said, 'Mastermoshai, please make my son into a true human being'.

That day, I escaped with minimum responses. If only I knew how to make human beings out of the children entrusted in our care, then perhaps I really would have become a true teacher, rather than an ordinary instructor at a primary school.

Mohammad Jinnat Hossein
Bachahar Madrasah Primary School
Maldah

Today, 10th June, 2011, Friday, we have gathered for a workshop at Indubala Primary School in Maldahh. The workshop started a little late. The inaugural speech was delivered by the Samiti

chairperson Sadhan Pal. Then the representatives of Pratichi started the workshop straight away. Before that each one of us was given three books and a collection of essays.

What I like best is that this workshop has no specific limitations. There are no speeches. Instead this workshop is about documenting teachers' experiences. There has been no instruction whatsoever about how these experiences should be penned. My experiences as a schoolteacher has numerous sides to it like environment around the school, interaction with parents, extraordinary teaching experiences, the villager's inputs on improvement of infrastructure of the school and so on. Besides, I have noticed the discrimination while distributing fund received from Sarva shiksha mission and of course experiences relating to the Mid Day Meal. But this will need lots of time. Though I have never thought in this way earlier, I must say I have received inspiration from this workshop. I will try to write about a few experiences from my twenty-five years of teaching.

I joined my first school in 1982, at Kail Primary School. After receiving my appointment letter, I discovered that there was no school in that village. After much hunting, I finally discovered a clubhouse where card games were carried on all day. There was a little break in the afternoons. We spoke to the club leaders and began the school on the veranda of the club. We also began looking for the owner of the land on which the clubhouse had been built. Upon discovering his name, we met him and asked him for the details about the land and the building. We found out that the area was taken over by the young men of the village and later the landowner was made to register twenty-three percent of the land in the name of Kail Primary School. We did not have to go into an overt confrontation with the club - they left the ground eventually. Many such schools have thus grown out of people's munificence. Landowners have gifted the space but the schools have lost the relevant documents. The transfer has not been recorded.

My experience of teaching and learning is this. Who are the children who keep falling behind? The children from the backward communities -- the Santhals, the Kora and so on. Their mother-tongue is not Bengali. The children who come from these families are usually around 5 years old. They don't speak a second language, they don't understand Bengali, and of course they don't speak it. The result is that even if I try a great deal, I can't really communicate with them, can't really make them speak in the classroom either. No matter how much I try, the child is incapable

of understanding the instructions, and therefore of following them. For example if I tell a child, 'Come here', there is no response. Then if I ask the child, 'what is your name?' there is again no response. Like this, it carried on for several days. Towards the beginning, I used to feel very helpless and even guilty. Then I went to my friend Dharma Hembrom, who lives in a village in the Santhali neighbourhood. Every evening, I asked her to teach me a little bit of their language. At the beginning I only learnt the words that I needed inside the classroom. Dharma used to say a few words to me, and I used to write them down in my notebook. Along with this, I started testing my new language skills in the classroom. Instead of saying 'Come here', I said, 'nonde hijume'. And the child came to me. Instead of saying 'Read this', I said, 'parhao may'; instead of saying 'Write', I said 'al may'. Instead of saying 'Write this well', I said 'machh tay al-may'. Now the children's responses improved. I was encouraged, and at the same time I became even more determined to do better. After this, I started visiting children's households. The first day, when I went to a particular child's house, he immediately brought out a seat for me, showed me the seat and said 'Durup may, sir'. Then he went inside to call his mother. I found the mother was very happy to see me. 'One day my son came home and said, 'Today the teacher spoke in HoR language!' Then he threw his arms around my neck and said, 'From today, I'll go to school every day!' '

So my experience is this: to teach those children whose mother tongue is not Bengali, and make sure they come to school regularly, it is the teachers' duty (or responsibility) to learn at least that much of their language that eases classroom communications. Otherwise these children will come to class and not participate. If they don't participate they will not learn, and if they don't learn they will not find the necessary enthusiasm to come back to school. After a month, they will start dropping out. This is why I think; at least for Class 1 or Class 2, it is very important for a teacher to collect data on each child's background: what family does he or she come from? What is the family's situation like? What language is spoken at home? And so on and so forth. This will help them identify what sort of help each child needs, and thus help them stay in school and learn well.

It has been five years since we have planted mango trees with the money provided by the Sarva Shiksha Mission. These trees have now started bearing fruit. A few days back, we took the half-ripe fruits from the trees and kept them in the school office to ripen. Yesterday, we distributed

them amongst the children. This has given us excellent results. And the success of it has encouraged me to do other new things with my students. My enthusiasm and determination has me in their grips. Let me see what we can do.

This workshop on documenting our experiences of teaching and learning I have not been able to write everything. However, I have been inspired to document all my experiences in my spare time. Let me see if in the near future, I am able to note all of them down at the same place.

Ambujapada Raha
38, Rajpara Primary School
Murshidabad

A serpentine red-pebbled street goes through a green shaded area. Mango, banana and star-apple trees line the local pond. At the end of the street there is the school. The village is called Jethiya; the school is called 27, Jethiya Primary School, Raghunathganj Circle. My life here began in 1995. At the very first look, I fell in love with this school in such distractingly attractive natural settings.

Behind the school there is a green field. Beyond it lie the borders of the cultivated lands. Beyond even that, the canal and then the rail line. Across the rail line, there lies the Badshahi road that leads to Mirjapur's Sagardighi. Rows of eucalyptus trees adorn the landscape. All together, it is as pretty as a picture.

Inspired by Rabindranath Tagore's idea of involving nature in education, I had decided to use the surrounding natural settings as much as possible in my teaching. Having drawn up a particular plan for the class 4 children, I invited them to join me on a field trip one day. When I reached the school, Milan, Subrata, Banshi, Badal, Bandana, Reeta, Kaushik, Chobi, Shapla were already waiting for me. Brimming with excitement, they surrounded me and wanted to know when we would be setting out for the village fair. The day's field trip was planned around giving them a grasp of 'Geography: a sense of place' and 'History: making connections'. We took the red pebbled road to the edge of the village. Here there's an old pond; four sides of it are cemented but the staircases on opposite ends are broken. The broken staircases disappear under the water after a few steps. In many places, the stairs and the cemented surroundings were covered in

moss; I asked the children to step carefully in them. The entire area was covered in shrubs. At the base of the broken staircase, faded letters had been carved into a black stone slab. Clearing the dry leaves away, I asked the children to read what was written. Haltingly, they began reading it letter by letter. Finally they said ‘Sir it says ‘Dedicated to the memory of mother Soudamini Das, son Pankaj Das has dug this pond. Year 1893.’

‘Sir, 1893 was a long time ago, wasn’t it?’ eyes full of surprises asked me. I smiled, and said ‘m-a-n-y days ago this pond had been dug... say around 105 years back’. They wrote this down in their notebooks. Looking at their faces I saw the joy of discovering something written on them. Very briefly I told them about Pankaj Das. They wrote that down too. I noticed that many of them were interested in the fact that Pankaj Das was the zamindar of Jethia Dafarpur. Many of them said, ‘Sir, we have seen the broken zamindar’s house in the village of Dafarpur.’ Other said ‘Sir, ghosts live in that house.’ I laughed. I said, ‘That is not it. Actually it’s an old house. Snakes and other dangerous things live in it, so elders scare you away with stories of ghosts. Why, haven’t you read the story of Ramratanbabu and the brahmadayitto in ‘Bibekanandar Chelebela’?’ The children cheered in agreement.

In the meanwhile it was afternoon. I said, let’s go to the fair. At the edge of the village, a Kali temple stands surrounded by pituli, shyaora, nakkati and other trees. On the last Saturday of the Bengali month of Chaitra, a village fair is held in the area on the event of the Kali puja. The paddy fields surround the temple. The paddy had been harvested but the stubble hurt the feet like needles. Shops had just started to open. Jiabul from Raninagar was setting up his shop. His companions, the other shopkeepers, had not arrived yet, but Jiabul was supervising the setting up of their shops as well. I explained this spirit of neighbourly helpfulness to the children. The children wrote down what shops were being set up. The idol was not yet ready. Elderly sculptor Dibakar Das was putting the finishing touches on it. We surrounded him, and asked him to tell us about the fair and the goddess. The children took out their notebook. Dibakar told us that it was many years ago that the tradition started. The idol is made in one day and worshipped on the same day. The fair continues all night and at dawn the idol is immersed in water at Dafarpur Ghat. Saying this in one breath makes his chest go up and down like a bellow, his eyes shine with tears. Before us no one had ever come to him wanting to know about these things. We come out of there and go to the area of the fair. Darkness was descending and the temple had been

decorated with tiny coloured bulbs. The children were discussing what they had learnt during the day. At the fair we met the temple priest. He told us that the Kali idol here has a special name - Milan Kali. Once long ago the village saw trouble between two local parties. The salishi (village court) that united the two parties was held in the temple courtyard. Since then the goddess is known as Milan Kali or the Kali who unites. From his story I realised how vastly beneficial the meaning of 'Dharma' can be. While leaving the fair I asked the children to look at the distance. Far away the lights of the Manigram church could be seen, as could the lights of the temple. I asked them, 'Can you see any difference between the two?' In a chorus they shouted, 'No sir!' That shout was my answer. I knew my day had been successful.

My school is located in a backward slum area. Almost all my students belong to minority communities. The grown men usually earn their livelihoods as construction workers; the women as biri-binders.

The locality offers me the opportunity to do something new here. First, I turned my attention to improving infrastructure, especially towards creating a child-friendly environment. Along with that I emphasised hands-on learning methods, cleanliness and hygiene, maintaining discipline, and paying attention to studies. In attempts to create child-friendly environments, attention has been paid to demonstrative teaching/learning materials and participatory teaching/learning materials. Steps of the school staircase have numbers written on them to help the children grasp their concepts; the walls have paper-pulp depictions of Rabindranath Tagore's poems; to increase interest in tribal cultures, 'Mahua Tolar Maath' has been included in the organised reading sections, and karam festival has been depicted on the walls in paper-pulp. Classrooms for classes one and two have planned decor on the walls: a mathematics wall, language wall and an environmental science wall, plus an activity corner. Besides these, each classroom has age-appropriate books of stories and poems decorating one corner of it. TLM are kept in their place beside the blackboard. There are flash cards, pictures, Hanoy tower for mathematics, chalk, duster etc.

Special efforts based on history or geography lessons and the local culture of specific districts also find place- seals from Harappa and Mohenjodaro, red pottery from Bankura, bauls of Bengal et al. The open air of the school further enlivens its environment. For the assembly every morning, children draw alpona (temporary artistic designs) on the ground, show pictures of the day and recite the local news. Several songs are also sung.

Being in a socioeconomically backward area, the problems of irregularity, indifferent parenting is present. However, I have undertaken attempts to transcend them with a sense of responsibility, interest, and sincerity.

Sri Arupboron Dutta
Lebu Bagan Primary School
Alipurduar

On the 15th of September 1994, at 10:45 AM, I reached the Jungle settlement or Poro near Alipurduar. It was 12 kilometres by bus and 1.5 kilometres on foot after that. Poro is in the Kalchini block, and settled almost entirely by the Rava community. The Poro FV Primary School was located in a small, dirty room behind the Poro forest beat office. There were 23 students and one teacher, who turned out to be the head-teacher. When I entered the classroom the head-teacher appeared happy and gave me a seat. I was surprised to see the number of students we had, and their general appearance and clothes. Not a single of them were bathed; some of them had a dress, others were bare-bodied, and they were all looking at me with surprise in their eyes. The head-teacher introduced me, but there was no change in the students' expressions. After this, the head-teacher took my joining report and went to the school inspector's office. Before leaving, he told the children, 'Go! School is over today'. Much to my surprise, the children remained where they were. I asked the teacher, 'Why are still sitting like that?' The teacher then waved his hand towards the door and said, 'Go! Go!' At once all the children got up and left. Afterwards I realized that 'school is now over' is incomprehensible to them. The head-teacher told me that the students all belong to the Rava community, their mother-tongue is Rava, so they do not understand anything said to them in Bengali. I asked, 'Then how do you teach them?' 'Oh, you know', he said, 'it's all duty. It's not like these children will ever amount to anything'.

I went home that day and cried a lot. I told my father, I am not going to be a teacher; I'm never going to go back to that school. Upon seeing my distress, my father, mother, grandfather and

uncle tried to console me and explain the situation in a positive way. They said, ‘Why don’t you try to work here for a few days? You’ll see you’ll start liking it. If you can do something for these children... why don’t you at least try and see?’

The next day I reached the school at ten thirty sharp. A few children were sitting in the school veranda and playing. I asked them their names. No one responded. I was again very surprised. Then the head-teacher arrived and unlocked the doors, and we were all able to go inside. The roll-call happened, and a few reading-aloud lessons took place. I asked the head-teacher ‘Isn’t there a prayer at the beginning?’ He said, ‘No. These children are incapable of that sort of thing.’ I went to my class and tried to begin teaching. Students belonging to four different classes were all sitting together. All of them were learning the letters. When I started teaching them, I saw that they did not speak a word on their own. If asked a question, they did not respond. I told the head-teacher, ‘I don’t think they understand anything of what we’re teaching them’. He said, ‘Well, do your best. Whatever happens will happen’. That day, my reaction was different. I went home and told my mother, ‘This is the school where I will teach. Let me see how much change I can bring here’. On the third day, I went to the school earlier, and sang ‘Jana Gana Mana¹¹’ to the children. They were very surprised, and heard attentively. Gradually, they came a little closer. I asked them, ‘Do you want to learn this?’ They nodded. From then on, I slowly started overseeing that they bathed before coming school, that they dressed properly, that they combed their hair, and so on, although all of these was done behind the head-teacher’s back. After a few days, the number of students also started increasing. After this, I started seating children from the four different classes separately. Using chalk, duster and the blackboard, I began teaching them a little, telling them stories, and playing games with them. In so doing, I had to face the head-teacher’s wrath, but I did not take that into account. I started teaching the way I wanted to. Within a month, the students started singing prayer songs before classes began; then they would enter the classrooms in a file. I had realized that the Bengali language was the main bottleneck for them. So I started drawing pictures on the board, showing photographs in class, and bringing charts and objects from around the school and my home to the classroom, so that I could show them things instead of speaking about them. I noticed that as a result of this the children had become much more enthusiastic and participatory in the classroom. I even began to get a few responses from them.

¹¹ ‘Jana Gana Mana’, written by Rabindranath Tagore, is the national anthem of the Indian republic.

After this I got a few pictures of national heroes in the classroom. This I did with the permission of the head-teacher. I began to tell the children a little about their lives in story sessions. After a short time, parents began to come to the school and tell me that the children talked a great deal about me at home. They said, 'Scold my child! Hit my child! Make sure (s) he studies even harder!' 'There is no need to scold or beat your children', I said. 'Just make sure they come to school regularly'. After that one day, during the children's lunch hour, I took them with me on a visit to their slum. After going a little, I could not go any further. Around the wells that spotted the slum, women were bathing in public with very little clothing on and without any embarrassment. I realized that the environment in these children's home was not very conducive. After this I told the head-teacher that I wanted to meet the parents. It was clear that he wasn't interested in this, but he was forced to call a meeting. Many of the parents came to that meeting. I spoke of the importance of children's education, the need for hygiene, and sending children to school regularly in as humble a way as possible. I also incorporated stories into the discussion. The parents, whose mother tongue was also Rava, understood some of what I said, and did not understand the rest. However, this was effective, because we saw attendance increase somewhat after the event. After this, in-between classes, during lunch hour or even during classes I began to learn a little bit of Rava, especially those words which would be useful during classroom interactions: 'foi', meaning 'come here'; 'shoku' meaning 'write'; 'kapchha' meaning 'I cannot'; 'sio' meaning 'correct'; 'tanu' meaning 'cut'; 'toa' meaning 'is there'; 'tongcha' meaning 'not there'; 'chaap' meaning 'stand/wait'; 'maifang' meaning paddy; 'non' meaning milk; 'mushu' meaning 'cow'; 'na' meaning fish, and so on. Much to my surprise, my usage of these words in the classroom, along with drawing pictures of the things, increased the enthusiasm of the children manifold. In the middle of all this, the head-teacher passed away and a few new teachers joined, and I was appointed the head-teacher. This increased my independence to teach the way I wanted to. Along with their studies, we started teaching the children to sing (rhymes, Bratachari songs, Rabindrasangeet), to draw and paint, paper crafts and various kinds of games. Emphasis was also laid on keeping the school clean, better hygiene etc. Within a few days the entire community was buzzing with change. Parents came to school to tell me 'Master, you're doing good things for us. Keep at it! We are with you. Our children always talk about you, they love you'. Encouraged, I decided to hold the Saraswati Puja at school. The day we bought the idol of the goddesses a big crowd gathered at the school. The local people had never seen an idol before.

The day of the puja, despite waiting till evening, we could not manage to find a priest. So I conducted the puja myself. The children had a lot of fun. Even the parents – who had come to the school – enjoyed themselves immensely. After that we started celebrating Independence day, Republic day, Rabindranath Tagore’s birthday, Vidyasagar’s birthday, rakhibandhan and so on. The local people were invited to all these functions. Teachers contributed towards buying sweets, which was distributed amongst them. Slowly, people’s love for the school began to grow. They began sending their children in regularly, and gradually the school started attracting students from neighbouring areas as well. Now we have 253 students. The Department of Forestry has given us a building, and the Sarva Shiksha Mission has given us three additional classrooms, and we have built toilets. We also distribute medicines for common ailments, so children come to school even with 103 degrees fever in hope of relief. Along with the school, the village has also changed. Women have learnt to value their privacy. Outsiders can roam the village at any point these days; they don’t have to cover their eyes in shame. Today, no difference can be found between urban children and urban folk, and our children and people from the forest of Poro.

Nayan Dutta
Chaklator Primary School
Purulia

My school is 12 kilometres away from Purulia, in a densely populated village (population according to the last census: 5000). This village has two primary schools, one shishu shiksha Kendra (SSK) and one secondary school. Literacy rate amongst children till the age of fourteen is 98 percent.

My school is more than a century old – it was established in 1905 – and built on 6 decimal land contributed by the kings of Chaklator. We have one large classroom, one medium-sized classroom, one small classroom, one office-room and one Mid-day Meal storeroom. The veranda is used for cooking the Mid-day Meal. The oven fills the classrooms with smoke. Teaching and learning becomes equally impossible. The classrooms are not enough for all our students. Because there is no spare space, the children eat in the classrooms. There are no toilets, nor any room for building them. There is no field for the children to play in, or a place for us to hold the

morning prayers. An extra classroom, which we need immediately, cannot be constructed for lack of space as well. This is a problem which we feel acutely every minute, but there is no possible solution to it. As a result, we cannot do anything with the children except teaching them in class. The school administration should look into how they can expand the very limited space of our school and improve it.

About 70% of our students come from lower middle classes and poor households. Some of them are amongst the first generation in their families to be educated. Most of their parents are daily labourers, agricultural labourers, or labourers at the brick-kilns. There is no environment of education in their homes. As a result, upon going home, these children are not encouraged to study. As a result, they keep lagging behind in their lessons. Children of labourers at the brick-kilns suffer especially because they migrate with their parents in search of work for almost six months a year.

The Mid-day Meal is a great necessity in the primary schools. Children from poor and lower middle class families eat the Mid-day Meal with a lot of enthusiasm and joy. Some of them even run home with an extra helping to share with their siblings. However I have a lot to say about the quality and taste of the food. I have certain well-thought-out and definite ideas about the programme. They are:

1. The schools which lie within and close to Purulia town (in a 15-20 kilometres radius) should be served by a modernised central kitchen. This will ensure that all students across schools get the same quality of food.
2. This will save fuel. Plus students and teachers will be saved from the smoke of cooking.
3. There will be no scope for questioning the caste and religion of the self-help group cooks.
4. Wastage of food will be checked.
5. The irregularity of funds and a lack of transparency in the process will no longer be problems. The head-teacher of the school will not have to worry about the programme any more.

The village does not have toilets. The local people use the empty fields or the edges of water bodies instead. The same water bodies are used for bathing. As a result, communicable water-borne diseases rule supreme, and the children suffer from constant illnesses and anaemia. One such water body is located right behind our school and its edges are filthy and smelly. It prevents us from opening the windows of the adjoining classroom.

The lessons on hygiene that we impart in class thus go to waste because the villagers do not have the economic ability to build toilets in their homes; neither does the local society create a pressure on individuals against defecating in the open. Most of the other common measures of hygiene are also ignored in the community. The village panchayat should take up this matter seriously and ensure that the village becomes a clean, hygienic place.

Because we have a high PTR (65), we cannot pay equal attention to everybody. And because there is a paucity of classrooms, we cannot divide them up either. Because of high PTR, if we assign any work, a great deal of our time goes in marking it. Another problem of large classrooms is that because of the crowded atmosphere, a lot of the children fail to pay attention.

Amrit Barman

Chhat Jor Patki Special Cadre Primary School

Coochbehar

I am Shri Amrit Barman; I first joined as a teacher on 1999. At that time, my school had 155 students. There was three other teachers' one of them a woman. A few months after I joined, she went to another school. In 1999, the head-teacher retired. This left me with only one colleague. This colleague was an influential person in a political party, which kept him occupied. So I was the one who had to take care of the school's official business as well as the teaching.

When I first joined the school, I noticed that the children didn't carry any lunch or snacks. This was before the Mid-day Meal programme had begun. The children came to school in the morning, by afternoon they were too hungry to concentrate on studies. Hence we had to close the school by 1:30 or 2 pm. This made me very uncomfortable. To prevent children from going home by lunch-hour, I declared that lunch-hour would be extended to include games therefore children should eat rice for breakfast before coming to school [so they would be full till afternoon], or they would not be able to learn the games that I would teach during lunch. Children love games, so most of them began coming to school after a heavy breakfast and remained after lunch break. I taught one class after the break, and then let school be over. Some of the students who were interested in learning stayed behind to attend the extra class as well, even with an empty stomach. A few of the very poor children however, whose families couldn't manage breakfast, continued to leave before the break. Sometime after this was instituted, some

of the parents met me and said that the children should not be kept after break because it made them skip lunch at home. I told them, 'If a hungry child wants to go home, I will not stop him or her. However I will take a class after the break. Those who wish to stay could do so. If you want your children to grow up properly, then you will make sure they eat something in the morning before coming to school. After this, attendance after lunch has gone up gradually.'

In the year 2000, the DPEP Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan began, several workshops were held, and in those workshops the demand for children's lunch was raised. According to this demand, the SSA began a Mid-day Meal programme - at first it was dry food, and then cooked meals. A direct result of this programme has been increased attendance which gives us more time with them, in which we can teach. So for the overall development of the school system, the Mid-day Meal programme is vital. It has to continue.

But the honorarium for the cooks should be increased a little. Also, the expenses of the Mid-day Meal do not come regularly every month. In some cases, as many as four or six months go by without payment. This is a direct problem for the cooks, who have to shop on loan. After a certain period, the shopkeepers do not want to extend credit. The Programme should ensure that the money reaches school within the month, or two months at the most. Alongside, they should ensure that the quality of the rice provided is good.

Teachers play a greater role than most in nation-building. So if teachers are not sincere in their duties, the repercussions are felt widely. Not all teachers are equally serious about their responsibilities. From 1999 till 2010, there were just two teachers running my school most of the time. I would be the one trying my hardest to teach the children well, whereas my colleague would spend most of his time in administrative matters. He did not have time to concentrate on teaching. I had to teach classes 1 to 4, and as a result, could not concentrate on any class enough. In spite of that several of my students would come first, second or third in the entrance exam held by the neighbouring high school, and many of them would score star marks at their madhyamik exams [O levels].

In 1999, I had 155 students. Then gradually at one point, we had 428. In the last academic year, we had 331 students. This year so far, we have 301. Our neighbouring schools have all been limited to 100/200 or less students.

Therefore I think that if the teacher is sincere, the quality of education is bound to become better. This is why despite teaching four classes singlehandedly; my school always had more than 300 students. Some of our more affluent parents took their children out of our school and put them in a private school nearby, because they thought a single-teacher school can never teach their children anything. At the end of the academic year, they realised that the private schools taught even less than I did, teaching alone. The next year, their children were back in my school. I had quite a few students like these. Still, school administration needs to be more supportive. If monitoring from an administration is weak, a teacher's sense of responsibility also weakens. Most of the rural families are poor. They cannot pay for their children's education needs, not even notebook, pens, slates, etc. Schools should have larger contingency funds to pay for such things, to ensure that children's education is not stopped for such basic wants. Of course, there will be a few corrupt teachers, who will attempt to make a few rupees by showing fake vouchers. An efficient and regular monitoring system should help eradicate such practices. Teachers should not be left with the full responsibility of the education process. Just like regular inspection will make teachers more responsible, they will also identify teachers who are doing well. Such teachers should be awarded. The recognition of their contribution will definitely inspire teachers and make them perform better.

Ramaprasad Banerjee
Seba Milani Primary School
Murshidabad

English teaching (Story telling)

It was the summer of 2010. Conducting classes in the unendurable heat was indeed tough. The new English textbooks for Class 4 had not yet been taught. The teacher who usually teaches English in Class 4 was our head-teacher. She handed over the responsibility to me for a few days. Remembering that language's chief function is communication I spent the first few days communicating with the students. Then I began telling them stories in English. At first the students were very wary, very nervous whether they would understand anything. To help them get past their fear, I would wear different kinds of tails - cow, calf, goat, and elephant. Laughter made their fear flee. One day I brought a live goat to the classroom. Before beginning to tell

them a story about the goat, I pointed to the head-teacher's bangles and necklace and introduced the word 'gold' to them. Then I introduced a few more words and acted out their meaning: greed, angel, cute, fair-skinned, touch and god. After this I told them the story of the 'Greedy King', who had asked god for a boon by virtue of which everything he touched turned to gold. I narrated the story with actions; repeating the same sentence over and over again and making the students participate in the process. Like, I would say, 'When the king touched the table, the table turned into...?' and the students answered 'Gold!' At the end of this lesson, many of the students were capable of retelling the basic story with words and short sentences. Even a mentally challenged student (whose speech is unclear) acted a small part of the story. The same story was repeated the same way for a few days, at the end of which nearly all of the students could repeat the story in short English sentences. My experiment of teaching English via story-telling was successful.

Demonstrating Mathematics (Class 1)

I brought some learning material to class: ice-cream sticks and a box of 50 buttons per child. I drew pictures on the board. Following me the children made a flower pot with one stick, branches of a tree with five and four buttons per branch as flowers. After all the children finished making the tree, I asked them how many flowers they could count. They said 20. I asked them to add two more branches and four flowers per branch. Then I asked them to count again. The answer was 28. Why did the number increase? All the students could answer this, 'Because we have put more flowers on the tree.' I said, 'This is called addition.' I conducted the same exercise a few more times till all of them had grasped addition and were confident they could now do additions. Next I asked them to take away three branches and the flowers on it. I asked them to count the number of flowers taken away: they said 12. Following the earlier pattern, I explained the concept of subtraction to them. After practising subtraction, their learning materials went back to their boxes. Instead I drew two pictures on the board, one of balls being added to a pile, and another birds flying away. I asked the students which picture represented what. They could identify the addition and the subtraction correctly. Now I represented the addition and subtraction in the drawing with numbers, like $3 \text{ (balls)} + 3 \text{ (balls)} = ?$ And $4 \text{ (birds)} - 2 \text{ (birds)} = ?$ The children looked at the pictures and solved the problems correctly.

Celebrating Rabindranath Tagore's 150th Birth Anniversary

My school is located in a slum area. All the students of the neighbourhood are students of my school. In 2009 I decided, the next year being Rabindranath Tagore's 150th birth anniversary, we were going to celebrate in style. Of course, the prospect also worried me a little. How were we going to organise it? The background of my students' families didn't make it likely that they could sing Tagore's songs or dance with them. I decided it would be the school's responsibility to train them. Rehearsals began almost nine months before the event. Parents were astonished. A month or two before the event they expect, but nine months seemed a lot. Preparations took a lot of effort, since most of the students found it difficult to pronounce Tagore's chaste Bengali. Secondly, they also found the tunes of Tagore songs rather trying. But a long period of rehearsals gave them an added edge. In the end the function was spectacular. Long practice made even the most unlikely student a good performer. On the day of the event, the boys wore kurta-pajamas and the girls wore sarees. The students first went around the entire neighbourhood, playing Tagore's songs on speakers. The people of the community soon joined the procession. The procession ended at the school where the students sang and danced. This event had a surprising effect on the neighbourhood. The students began speaking more politely, their Bengali has improved and they begin singing songs from the event every now and then, and sometimes they bring me the Gitobitan and ask me to teach them the songs. Some students have also started practising on the school's harmonium. Film songs, which dominated earlier, have become a rarity.

Index

In the year 2000, our new head-teacher encountered an administrative problem. The considerable amount of paperwork that she had to deal with - order forms, rice accounts for the MDM, TLM, ¼ MG, ¼ SDG etc - was in disarray. I solved the problem by asking her to get about 32 large folders. When they were bought, I cut numbers from the calendar and stuck them on the folders. Then I made labels for each folder, listing what was kept in them. I made a table with the list of the file numbers, along with their content and arranged it under the glass top over the teacher's table for fast consultation. This solved the problem of disarray, and also stopped us having to leave lessons in the middle to hunt down pieces of paper.

School Parliament

In the last few years, we have consistently created a school parliament with children. This year, the process of enrolment is still on, so the parliament will be set up in the end of April. The students' meeting is convened on Saturdays. Taking their opinions on board, various students are appointed the prime minister, the health minister, the food minister, the discipline minister and so on and each minister is provided with four deputy ministers. Each minister is given an area of responsibility, like the cleaning minister must keep the school clean. Once a month, the parliament meets to discuss their various problems. Teachers are also present at this meeting. Teachers have a lot of duties outside their teaching responsibilities; having a functional school parliament helps us take care of these to a certain extent. It also helps the students learn the democratic process, and become good citizens in the future.

Mother Teacher Committee

A functional mother-teacher committee is vital to the functioning of the school. However attendance at the first few meetings we organised was very low. Speaking to the mothers, I realised that the problem was that they were not taking out verbal invitations seriously. So for the next meeting we had a printed notice delivered. This made the mothers very happy because (a) they thought that a meeting that warranted printed invitations was an important meeting, and (b) it was a matter of honour to be invited to such a meeting. But I had made another mistake. I had not taken into account the mothers' responsibilities. Most of these women are busy till afternoon with domestic work or working in the fields. From then on, all MTC meetings have been scheduled for after 2:30 or 3 PM, and attendance has gone up considerably.

Teaching Arithmetic

The most difficult section for students of Class 1 is determining largest and smallest values in a given set. When I first started teaching arithmetic to children, I did not realise how difficult conveying basic concepts to children would be. Finally I came upon an idea. I stood to attention at the head of the class and asked students how much space my feet were taking up. They said, very little. Then I spread my legs wide and asked them how much space I was taking up now. They said a lot more. Then I drew a greater than and a lesser than sign on the board ($<$, $>$), and asked them to identify the narrow or the smaller numbers' end, and the broad or the bigger

numbers' end. Then I took two numbers, 5 and 7, and asked them which number should go to which end. To my surprise, most of them answered correctly, that is, $5 < 7$. From then on, I have never had to worry about my students not understanding this particular lesson.

Dhee Ganguly
Surendraprasad Lower Basic School / U-II
Jalpaiguri

I first joined the teaching community in November, 2003. The school where I teach now is my first school. I was then 23, very enthusiastic, convinced that I could be a very good teacher who would teach much more beyond the textbook. On my first visit I was charmed by the natural beauty around the school. The school is surrounded by tea estates. If you follow the road that runs beside the school you would come up to a field where innocent tribal children play. The name of the school had been recently repainted. I was very happy. The bright, bold letters spelt – Surendraprasad Lower Basic School/ U II, it made me feel very happy. The same day, a didimoni (female teacher) joined the school as well. Both of us reached the school quite early. We met and spoke to each other. We were very glad that two new teachers were recruited in the same school. We decided that together we were going to do a lot for the school. Within a few days however, we began to face a multitude of problems. Before going into a discussion of the problems, I first want to give a general idea about my school:

- Social identity - My school is located within a tea estate. The local community around my school are tribals or adivasis. Their mother tongue is Sadri.
- Economic condition - Most students come from economically challenged families. They have to work day in and day out to make enough just for the bare minimum bare necessities of life.
- Extent of education - Very few pupils have literate parents. Most of the parents are not equipped to help their children with their studies even remotely at home.

Now let us look at the problems that I have faced at the school.

Language problem - The biggest problem to me in the school is the language of communication. My mother tongue is Bengali, the school is a Bengali-medium school. However, the students' mother tongue is Sadri. In most cases, especially when they are young in Class I or II, they don't

understand Bengali at all. 'The mother tongue is like the mother's milk / primary education should always be via the children's mother tongue' all these ideas are meaningless in this context, which is why it is very difficult to attract the children's attention towards the lessons. I'll provide an example. The day we celebrated Rabindranath Tagore's birthday, this is how we started. 'It is a special day today. Do you know what day it is today?' The children answered, 'special'. This should make it clear that they don't understand even simple sentences. When asked to respond, they focus on the unfamiliar word in any given sentence.

Undernourishment - Undernourishment is a big problem in our locality. The children are very thin; their eyes are dead, and their skin pale. This is because they live in unhygienic surroundings. They frequently suffer from stomach disorders and other waterborne diseases, and as a result their irregularity at school is very high.

Here the pupil-teacher ratio is not right, and this is further compounded by the fact that the teachers have to participate in a lot of duties beyond their classroom delivery duties.

Another big problem at my school is that the parents of quite a few of my students are from families of migratory labourers. At particular seasons, they go long distances away from their home to secure work, especially in the brick-kilns of Tripura. Now when they go, they take their children along with them. I'll give another example. Last year, I used to primarily teach Class I. There was a girl in my class called Bipati Urao. The girl used to respond quite well in class, she even used to try to answer in Bengali. So I thought that in the third assessment, she is going to do very well. Suddenly I see before the exam, she stopped coming to school. Right before the exam, I finally asked around and discovered that she had gone to the brick-kiln with her parents. I was forced to think how a bright child was being denied an education because of her family's socio-economic conditions.

These problems are not totally without solutions. For example the language problem has been solved to some extent. To reach the children I have discovered that I have to learn some of their language. I can't speak like they do, but even a little touch of the local language makes children more responsive in the classroom. The boy or the girl who did not talk at all previously will now come to me and answer me in their own tongue. This new responsiveness encourages me to learn their language even better. The Mid-day Meal has addressed the problem of undernourishment to some extent as well.

I would like to record a particular incident here. Now in every class of the school, we have children at different levels of learning, very advanced, mediocre and backward. At the end of the year, we notice that the first two groups usually reach their goal but I was quite unsuccessful in helping the backward children reach their goal. This year, I struck a new idea. I set the goal of the backward children a little lower towards the beginning of the school year and created a special notebook at home for them. My aim was to build their confidence right at the beginning by giving them workbooks which they could actually understand and complete. The workbook for students at the medium level and very advanced level were different. The results were very good. The students, who otherwise showed no progress throughout the year, performed quite a bit right at the beginning. They became more active, their confidence escalated, they began to enjoy the class more and they started participating in the activities, which in turn improved their work even more.

Conclusion - Many of our problems remain unsolved because I believe that education, health, economic conditions are all beads strung on the same thread. If one is pulled down, the whole thing falls apart. Still, we must not give up and must keep hope alive, because hope will encourage us to think over the solutions instead of focussing on the problems, and one solution for one problem might result in a greater solution for greater problems for the whole community.

Ranajit Kumar Rakshit

Paanishala Rajmohan Barman R.R. Primary School

Coochbehar

Being a teacher has been my dream ever since I was a student myself. When I finally became a teacher, I joined my first school with a lot of dreams in my eyes and indeed, till today, the memories of those first days keeps my enthusiasm for the profession alive. I shall try to record a few of those memories in the write up below.

Before entering the school on the first day, I had certain visions about the school and myself as a teacher, but upon reaching the school I saw there was a momentous rift between ideas and reality. I was very disappointed to see that my dreams would not materialise immediately. But I did not give up. I decided that I would have to work with whatever I had and indeed

disappointment made my determination to do well even stronger. I always had an idea that the school that I would be assigned to would be like my temple. The small children who come to us in the primary school are simple, innocent souls. I should mention here that the school that I first started teaching in was in remote rural area. In that area, most of the children are 'first learners' whose standard of living is very low. It is primarily the children of daily labourers who are my students. I gradually began to understand the various problems of their lives. Our head-teacher and I went to every house in the locality that my school serves and tried to convince the parents the importance of sending their children to school regularly. Our effort was not completely successful, but we have succeeded in bringing a considerable number of the local children to school regularly. This is partly because we have been able to convey to them that coming to school is good not only for the literacy of their children but also because they can access some extra benefits from it. The government being very sympathetic towards the cause of primary education provides textbooks, uniform, also a Mid-day Meal. After the problem of enrolment and attendance was partly solved, we started teaching the new students with renewed vigour. At the beginning it was good. The Village Education Committee or VEC was very supportive and the local community was also very enthusiastic about the school but slowly I noticed that every year children started dropping out. Upon enquiring I found out that the new private schools which were mushrooming in the area were responsible for it. There's a certain idea within the population at large that no studying goes on in the public primary schools and therefore if children are to be educated they must be sent to private schools. I would say that currently the biggest problem for the public primary schools in the state is these KG or kindergarten schools. The people in villages who are slightly affluent send their children to these private schools to mark their economic difference from their neighbours. The private school children wear the same uniform, they have a backpack, they carry a water bottle with them, they go to school and come back from school in a designated van - all of these attract even those children whose parents are not moneyed enough to sending them to schools like that. However the parents finally give in to their children's wish, even if it eats into most of the family's income.

After noticing these trends I tried to solve the problem from the roots. My current big problem is rescuing my school from the bane of private schools. I have started visiting houses again and talking to the parents. I have tried to explain them with examples, 'If you fry potatoes at home and if your neighbour brings those colourful packets of potato chips, then which is healthier and

safer to eat?' The public primary school is the potato that you fry yourself at home, and the private schools are those packed potato fritters which give your children tummy upsets. The public primary schools are in a much better condition than these schools. My efforts have borne some fruit so far and the fight is on. I have promised that within the next few days I will insure that not a single child in my neighbourhood enrolls at the private schools.

That was the external problem. I have also determined to make the teaching and learning in my classroom a more attractive process. For example we celebrated Rabindranath Tagore's 150th birthday with a small cultural event. The children were very delighted with it. Apart from this, I hold a competitive cultural event at my school every year. The children enjoy the singing and dancing very much and besides, it helps engender a spirit of competition in them which has been my aim.

Although the government encourages primary education these days they should pay more attention to a few matters. For example, they should keep in mind that textbooks are to be provided they should be provided at the beginning of each session. They should think a little more about the way in which English is going to be taught because the mother tongue is the best way in which children learn.

Anyway, whatever the conditions are like, I will keep on trying to make myself into an ideal teacher and be more sincere towards my responsibilities. Going forward despite whatever problems may come shall be my only goal in as a teacher.

Biswanath Midde

Sarvadhikari Abaitanik Primary School

South 24 Parganas

I first joined as an assistant teacher on the 11th of January, 1994. The school I was assigned to was Chaulgola Abaitanik Primary School in the Mandirbajar Circle in the South 24 Parganas. The very first day, upon reaching school, I had to bear witness to a huge fight between parents and teachers on being late to school. Naturally, it was not a pleasant experience. The school was 25 kilometres from home and commuting was difficult because transportation was not easily available. Yet I decided, however troublesome it might be, I would have to come to school

before everybody else. I started bicycling to school, which amounted to almost 50 kilometers. Gradually, the other teachers also started coming to school on time. This gave me a lot of joy. I taught at that school for nearly 10 years. After that, I have been transferred to a school much closer to home which makes things easier but my first school still remains close to my heart. I shall mention a particular incident of the first school and conclude my writing. I was a new teacher then and each day ushered in new experiences. One day, I saw the fight between two of our students escalating to a fight between their parents. I also saw that the stronger side punish one of the children of the weaker side right in front of us. To my astonishment, our head-teacher and my colleagues, three other older teachers remained silent audiences to this. Later I asked them why they didn't interfere and they said it was the best to stay away from these local matters. Matters like these happen here every single day. This made me rather sad. In fact I started feeling rather guilty. I thought, should teachers merely limit themselves to teaching from the textbook. Do they have no role in social improvement, in instituting basic humane behaviour and protecting human rights in their areas? From my own questions to myself, I realised I had acted like a coward that day, and deeply shaken I promised myself that I would never let such a matter happen in my presence again. Days passed. I came to school on time and went back on time, but the guilt inside me did not let me rest in ease till the day I found the opportunity to make amends for my previous cowardice. This incident probably took place during the sixth month of my teaching career.

That day as usual, I had reached the school at 10:30 in the morning. Quite a few of our students had already arrived. Since school hadn't started yet, I was sitting inside and reading a story book. A piercing shout of a child brought me outside. I came and saw one of the students of Class 4 was shaking in terror. I went to the child and asked what the matter was, and the child said that 'they' would come and hit him. I asked who 'they' was and came to know that this child had become involved in a fight with one of the children from the village's most influential families and was afraid that one of 'them' would come and beat him up. I told the child, 'Don't be scared, as long as I am here, no one will be able to lay a finger on you.'

No other teacher had reached the school when I saw the other child's parents come to school screaming and brandishing a stick. Before he could climb onto the school veranda, I stood in his way. He was determined to beat up the first child to fulfil his vengeance. Politely, I asked him not to do it. He wouldn't listen to me. He tried to push me aside. Then I was compelled to be

very firm and told him, 'Two of my children have quarrelled in my home, who are you to punish one of them?' Finally I was able to dissuade him and send him home. He was furious with my interference and went home. At the end of the school day, I went to his house to apologise for my rudeness in the morning. I was amazed when he held my hands and started crying. Then he blessed me to be just as fearless in my dedication to my students always. The good thing that came of it was that after this incident, fights between children have remained within children. No other parent has ever come to school to interfere.

It has been almost eight years that I have come to my current school, but even now, parents and my former colleagues from my first school stay in touch with me. I am very grateful to them for the love and affection that they have thus extended to me.

Leela Das

Chotobon Shyamnagar Mahatma Gandhi Smriti Sishu Shiksha Kendra (I)

South 24 Parganas

At first I was a homemaker. In the year 2000, I heard on the radio that the block office was going to establish schools in every village. So we went to the block office and sought permission to start a school. After receiving approval from them, we went to speak to the head of the Panchayat and the local head and they said we should be at least forty years old to start this venture. Accordingly we wrote our application and sent it in. On the 7th of April 2000, a colleague and I were appointed Sahayikas at this Shishu Shiksha Kendra or SSK. We went from door to door and asked parents to send their children in. We have had to overcome a lot of problems and attacks to establish this school but we have continued to run it till now.

We just feel sad that the parents of our students don't realise the difficulty and sincerity with which we run the SSK. If they did, they would surely send their children to school on time. In 2006, there was an election and as a result we had a committee of directors for the SSK. Since the government provides an honorarium to the sahayikas, the committee of directors felt that it was our responsibility to go door-to-door every day and bring the children to school, but we would like the committee to help in more concrete ways. For our part, we give the SSK the best of our efforts.

Not all children are the same. The current way of teaching involves using various teaching-learning materials to help children learn better. If the children are made to sit in different groups on the basis of their performance, strong, mediocre and under-performers, we can go around each group while they are doing their work. Thus we can ensure how they are getting on, whether they are chatting with each other or actually doing their work. In this way we can try and understand how each child approaches the class work and use that information in dealing with the child. This sort of personal attention encourages the child and they become active participants in the class. It is very easy to teach children once we befriend them. The children these days are very smart. They must be taught through stories, songs, dances, classroom performances and so on. Parents sometimes object to this. They come and ask us why the children are not being taught from books written by Vidyasagar. We have to explain to them that we are following the same content, only putting it in a different format. We invite them to come to the school and see the various teaching aids that we use. UNICEF has provided us with different kinds of TLM. We use those as well. We use the money from official grants to make our own TLM or buy them. We use them in every class and make sure there is an environment of joyful learning at the SSK. From 2003, there is a radio program for us, sahayikas, at eight at night. We tell all the children in our school to listen to the program and the next day, we discuss what was heard on the radio in the classroom.

If we follow the guidelines of our vocation and are sincere in our efforts, then none of the children should drop out of school. If a child remains absent for a while, we go to the child's home and bring him or her to school. We talk to their mothers about what the problem might be. From the year 2010, we have been holding monthly meetings with mothers. In these meetings, we discuss the children but also discuss the mother's own health status, give them advice about what food would give them more energy and nourishment, ask them to be tested for anaemia and help them get iron tablets for it, counsel them against underage marriage and so on. We also explain the lessons that are covered from Class 1 to Class 4, so that they know what their children are learning.

Every month, we also have one or two meetings with the committee of directors. All the data pertaining to that particular month as well as the teaching and learning processes are discussed in these meetings. We also talk about what the parents have been saying both to the committee and to us. We love the SSK like our home. As soon as it's ten in the morning, we go to the building

and clean it with our students. The source of water is one kilometre away, but going there with our students and bringing back drinking water does not feel like a chore. Education is not something one can acquire only from books. Instilling discipline in the children, teaching them how to talk to people properly, how to conduct themselves, to be polite, to be selfless, to know a little bit about their social environment, all of these things are part of the education that we give to children around us. At our SSK, we try to make the education a holistic process. We tell the children stories from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, we discuss various aspects of general knowledge, we read excerpts from the biographies of great men and women, and we do crafts together, sing songs and teach the children to sing songs as well.

In 1976, I passed my Higher Secondary examinations. My father could not send me to college and sometime later he arranged a match for me. I had been a homemaker since then. Domestic responsibilities kept me busy till the year 2000, when I became involved in this larger responsibility of educating the local children. Now domestic responsibilities come second to the school. If we don't go to the school and meet our children every day, there is an actual physical discomfort. During the Morning Prayer, if I see a particular child had not yet arrived, one of us goes to the child's home to bring them with us. We have accepted the motto of the Sarva Shiksha Mission -- no child shall remain outside the realm of learning. It is our job to take them there and we shall do it.

Sunil Gopal Chatterjee
Bablabona Primary School
Maldah

‘Should we gag the children with dry text books like the poor parrot in Tagore’s ‘Totakahini’? Should we promote rote learning with such great pomp?’ These questions occurred to me in 1970 when I was first recruited as a teacher. I could see and feel how social, economic and familial impediments were standing in the way of bright little children around me. Right there, I started an attempt to transform my teaching into a social responsibility, to help my students overcome these difficulties as much as I could. In spite of inadequate administrative help and insufficient social awareness, I have tried to shoulder my responsibilities as a teacher by befriending the children.

In the last 15 to 20 years, there has been an increase in the general awareness about the necessity of education in our society. Every illiterate person that I know, even if they are from very poor families, has come to realise that it is absolutely necessary to give their children the benefit of education. This has been aided by government policy making primary education compulsory and facilitating it, and at a ground level this attitude has also been nurtured by the teachers taking a personal interest in spreading the word about the necessity of being literate. As a result of the above, the expanse of education today is much greater than it was a few years back, but at the same time I have noticed that three different factors must come together for this upsurge to continue and develop: (1) Governmental goodwill expressed through administrative policies and their services, (2) The acceptance of social responsibilities by the teaching community, and (3) helping socio-economically backward families become financially as well as socially empowered.

On 25 June, 2010, I was deputed to the Bablabona Primary School. Upon reaching the school I found out that most of the students are from the backward scheduled caste and tribe communities. The infrastructure was adequate. Yet there were about 50-70 students who came to school every despite considerable chaos every single day. What I believe as proper education was lacking in the school despite bright young faces surrounding me. I noticed that most of the children were scared of coming to school and scared of the teachers. They had already convinced themselves that they couldn't do anything worthwhile. To address this, I first called the mothers of the children to school. Many of them came. After talking to them, I realised that nearly every child has a private tutor at home. 99% of my students' parents are illiterate. Yet they ensure that their children sit down to study at home in the evening. But the children cannot go beyond the textbooks, the parents cannot encourage the child to write a poem or read other books. In fact to be honest, they can't even make sure whether their child is studying properly or really studying at all. Some other mothers felt that their children are not interested in studying. Many of them felt since they had to go out to work they failed to keep an eye or monitor their children's education.

I understood and accepted that the familial handicap for these parents was immense.

Given this situation, I decided to become the children's friend myself. Taking into account their fear of textbooks, I decided not to use them too much in the class, and started teaching them through games, drawing pictures, pretending to put up little performances in the classroom and practising paper-craft. The disinterest and fear was transformed into intense interest in the classroom almost immediately. Once I had their attention, I slowly began to teach them small models of discipline. For example, making them stand in line, beginning the school day with a prayer, keeping their seating mats clean, keeping the classrooms clean, standing in small groups holding each others' hands and reciting a poem or part of a lesson. My main focus through these exercises was to instil in them a sense of unity, instead of encouraging the idea of the alienated individual. As I knew would happen, after the sense of community had been established, the sense of individual competition also grew. At first they recited the poems together, but once they got over the fear of recitation and everybody became good at it, the sense of competition, of doing better than their friends began to seep into the children. As a result, overall performance in the classroom increased. Children started doing better in reading, recitation, doing sums, being better disciplined, all of it.

I also started looking for patterns - What is a child's secret wish; what makes a child morose; what are their desires, what do they want to do inside the school, and outside it. I notice that there were not many things children wanted that weren't common. Using my newly acquired knowledge, I started telling stories in class, brought books which reflected these ideas, and was able to convey the lessons in the syllabus to them in this manner. In every lesson, every child found something or the other to identify with and as a result, the lesson became personally interesting to every child.

From the 50-70 children, today my school is attended every day by 257 children. The Mid-day Meal is had by 190-210 children.

From my own childhood, I remember that sums used to scare me. In the maths class, I used to first turn to the last page and look at the answers to that day's exercises and only then I was able to do the sum. And once I started getting them right my interest in doing more sums used to shoot up. I used this experience of mine to teach maths to the scared children of class 4. The first day of class I asked them, 'How many of you are scared of maths?' Almost everybody put their hands up. Then I asked the girls in the classroom, 'How many of you are scared of cooking?' Except for a few, everybody put their hands up. I asked them, 'Why are you scared of cooking?'

They said, 'Well, because we don't know how to do it.' Then I asked the girls who did not raise their hands, 'Why they were not afraid?', and they said, 'Oh, because we learnt cooking already.' I used this example to tell the children that maths is nothing to be scared of. One is only scared of something when one does not know how to do. If I teach them how to do it, then they will see how easy maths is. Indeed, that day, while sitting in the class (the class has 18 students), most of the students finished all 83 of the measurement sums that was in that day's exercise. The next year, all of these children very easily admitted themselves to the high schools and secondary schools of the neighbourhood. So what I want to say via this example is that in my 41 years of teaching, I have noticed that if we can identify with children, if we can socialise with them as children, become their friends, find out what they like, what they don't like and why they don't like it, what they want to do, what their interests are, then if we can build our lessons around these information, then children will accept it with joy, and keep coming back to school, and effectively make our own jobs easier.

However, in a few areas, I find that socio-economic conditions become a problem in the way of primary education. For example, families which professionally separate grains from chaff keep their children at home during the season because they need to have all hands on deck. One of my student's parents makes incense sticks, which they sell for Rs. 9 per kilo. My student, Ramchandra, was made to absent himself from school to contribute to his family's work. However one day, he came to school and told me, 'I have told my family, I am no longer going to help them make incense sticks because I am determined to come to school.' I was very happy to hear that he had decided to come to school but I couldn't forget the fact that his family would now suffer financially because his labour would be absent. Something should be done to address such problems.

I asked the parents, especially the mothers, to come to the school at least once a month. I asked them to ask me any questions, share any realisations or ideas they might have about their child's education. Often I have to hear complaints from them, sometimes this helps me understand a particular child's problems, at other times I help the mother clarify her ideas about what an education should be or we advise each other on how to help the child. The results from these meetings are always very good.

Nearly all the children in my school, as I have mentioned before come from illiterate families. A child's first sense from security comes from his or her mother, father or the household. So when

they first come to a new place to a new person that is to say to a school with teachers, their reaction is naturally fear. I have noticed that if I allow a child's fear to continue or if I terrify a child, then managing that child in the classroom becomes difficult. In this matter, I have been helped by a particular lesson from child psychology, which says that a child's curious mind always tries to go in the opposite direction that adults direct him or her to. When a child cries, the mother becomes irritated, hits the child and says, 'Shut up.' The child instead of shutting up, starts crying even louder. Once I decided to employ the lesson from child psychology to a crying child by saying, 'You cry so beautifully, but not everybody can hear you. Why don't you cry a little louder, so that everybody can hear how nicely you do it?' The child was confused at first and then fell quiet because this was outside his usual expectation. Because I asked him to cry louder, he would go the other way and keep quiet. So this is the way I have managed to discipline the undisciplined or hyperactive or disinterested children in my classroom. Things have come to such a pass that if I am late to school on a particular day, I am the one who has to provide excuses to my very disciplined and punctual students.

At the end of everything, I must say that teachers, in their own way, are always trying to bring positive change to society, but school administration is not as active in this regard as they could be. At the end of the day, teachers have to depend on administrative policies and goodwill. Their helplessness needs to be addressed. The Right to Education Bill of 2009 should have a few changes; otherwise the fruitful running of the schools will be impeded. There are also a few problems in the learning materials that are provided to schools, which require in-depth discussion and action.

Finally, I must mention the many workshops that happen with the teachers. Last year, there were about 20 workshops that were conducted for teachers. But these workshops mostly become a mechanical process. There is almost no discussion about why a workshop is being conducted in a particular area, where the new pedagogic methods come from, what sort of results we might see in the children once we use these new methods and so on. Instead, teachers are being made to feel that it is their duty only to reproduce whatever they learn in the workshops in classrooms. This is no way to motivate teachers. Instead I think teachers should be involved in the training process so that they can internalise it better and implement it likewise in their respective classrooms.

My experience as a teacher has taught me that teaching is not just a job but a social responsibility. You can never be a good and successful teacher if you merely consider your work a 'job'.