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**Roles and Responsibilities of the  
Teachers' Unions in the Delivery of  
Primary Education: A Case of  
West Bengal**

Manabesh Sarkar, Kumar Rana

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Chair: Amartya Sen

Managing Trustee : Antara Dev Sen

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

Pratichi Research Team  
76, Uttar Purbachal Road, Kolkata 700078  
Phone +91 33 24844229  
Fax +91 33 24843205  
e-mail: [Pratichi\\_team@sancharnet.in](mailto:Pratichi_team@sancharnet.in)

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

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# Roles and Responsibilities of the Teachers' Unions in the Delivery of Primary Education : A Case of West Bengal<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The demand for brevity sometimes makes definitions a bit unclear. Here we encounter a case: the legal dictionary website supplies us the definition of [trade] “union” as “an organisation of workers in the same skilled occupation or related skilled occupations who act together to secure for all members favourable wages, hours, and other working conditions.”<sup>2</sup> That there is much truth in the definition is beyond doubt; yet, it misses some of the important aspects of many of the trade unions who while rightly being concerned with the security of their employment and other “economic” matters are also engaged in pursuing larger social issues which, as such, have no direct connection with their interest. For example, in the 1940s the *Nihon Kyoshokuin Kumiari*, the Teachers' Union of Japan, launched a movement against the screening of the history textbooks and other issues such as the *Kimi Ga Yo* – the Flag of Japan.<sup>3</sup> In recent times teachers' unions in the UK have launched movements against the coalition Cameron government's axing of the school rebuilding programme.<sup>4</sup> One may remember a slogan that the unions supplied to students during the peak of Margaret Thatcher's rule in Britain: *Thatcher, Thatcher/ Milk snatcher*. In the US there have been countrywide demonstration led by the teachers' unions, among others, to defend public education.<sup>5</sup> That maximization of self-interest has not been the exclusive agenda of unions is evidenced from the history of teachers' unions in our country: aside from their concerned activism for the improvement of educational delivery the involvement of Kerala's teachers' unions in the state's overall development and West Bengal's teachers' unions extending support to the pro-poor movements, such as the food movement or the movement for land reform, and so on, are some examples.

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1. We are grateful to Dwaipayan Bhattacharya, Anirban Biswas, Manabi Majumder and Samantak Das for their comments and other helps. We are also thankful to Paromita Halder, Samar Chakraborty, Pradip Biswas, Swadesh Bhattacharya and Muniruddin Ahmed for various kinds of helps.

2. <http://legal-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Teachers'+union>

3. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japan\\_Teachers\\_Union](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japan_Teachers_Union)

4. <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=18139>

5. Cooke Shamus (2010), “Why Teachers Unions Matter” in *Global Research*, March 16, 2010; <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=18139>

Where does this sense of social responsibility come from? What made the unions launch teachers' movements in response to larger social policies (such as in Japan in the 1940s or in present-day UK), which apparently did not have any effect on the practical interests of the teachers? Why did the teachers' unions in West Bengal volunteer to take part in peasant movements? Was it mere passionate humanitarianism or some other motivation based on particular ideologies – more precisely, political ideologies? Instances from Japan, the US, South Africa, India and many other countries make the political connections of the unions quite obvious. For example, the largest teachers' union of Japan was clearly inclined to socialist ideology. The biggest teachers' union in the US had a clear left inclination.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, as regards partisan support, unions across the world have different characters. While the unions in India, in general, are affiliated to one or other political party, this is not the case all over the globe. There are unions in many countries which, in spite of their ideological leaning, do not take a partisan role. Whether partisan or not, the notion of social responsibility among the teachers' unions – or any trade union – is drawn from certain ideological resources. It is the ideological drive that has played a crucial role in the pro-people engagements of the teachers' unions which have had a profound impact, not only on the delivery of services in their respective field, but also with respect to other social issues, a characteristic example of which can be found in the history of teachers' unions in West Bengal. The teachers' unions, as we will see presently, have contributed positively in the field of primary education in the state.

Important as it is, the political inclination can also have some negative impact on the roles and responsibilities of teachers' unions, particularly when the unions become captive to certain narrow and sectarian political outlooks, and become pawns of particular political outfits. This case study attempts to show, from the records of a particular teachers' union, the *Nikhil Banga Prathamik Sikshak Samiti* (All Bengal Primary Teachers' Association - ABPTA), one of the largest primary teachers' organisations in India, with a membership of more than 1,21,000 (78 percent<sup>7</sup> of all primary teachers in West Bengal were reported to be members of this union), the various connections of the teachers' unions in the development of primary education in West Bengal.

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6. Miner Barbara (2004), "Why the Right Hates Public Education", The Progressive, [www.progressive.org/jan04/miner0104.html](http://www.progressive.org/jan04/miner0104.html)

7. Pradip Biswas (2007) had referred in *Amader Kotha in Sangram Andolone Nikhilbanga Prathamik Shikshak Samiti (1935-2005)*, vol. I, that the membership strength of ABPTA was more than 1,21,000 and according to the Annual Report, 2006-07, Department of School Education, Govt of West Bengal, the number of primary teachers in West Bengal in that year was 1,55,399.

It is however, not the numerical strength that made us look into the records of the ABPTA; in fact, we tried our best to gather material from other primary teachers' organisations as well, but failed to procure anything substantial. Ideologically, there are two broad streams of primary teachers' unions in West Bengal: "the left" and "the right". While the left are divided into some sub-streams, fed by the initiatives of various left parties, there is only one major right wing organisation. The ABPTA is not only the numerically strongest union but also shares the history of being part of the first teachers' union.<sup>8</sup> And, the organisation has shown meticulousness in keeping many of the records of its past activities and has compiled them in three large volumes.<sup>9</sup> The volumes contain reports and resolutions of various conferences of the organisation since its inception in 1935. The state-level conferences are the highest policy-making body of the organisation and the activities of the outfit are guided principally by the directions given in these conferences. Therefore, we considered it proper to examine in depth the reports made and resolutions adopted in these conferences in order to map the trajectory through which the organisation has travelled in the 75 years since its inception. Recently, Apple CEO Steve Jobs reportedly said, "what is wrong with our schools in this nation [the US] is that they have become unionized in the worst possible way. This unionization and lifetime employment of K-12 teachers is off-the-charts crazy."<sup>10</sup> Jobs will certainly be happy to see in India many takers of his view – in recent times union bashing has become a cherished *mantra* for many politicians, bureaucrats and academics, who – for all the problems that trouble the country – have brilliantly formulated a single solution: "scrap the unions". Unfortunately, the extremism of the union bashers is often responded to in an equally extreme, and consequently negative, "whatever-we-have-done-is-right" manner. What is required in this battle of extremes is to put the whole debate in its right perspective so as to learn from both the progressive and regressive aspects of teachers' unions.

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8. The ABPTA, formed in 1935, changed its name in 1948 as *Paschimbonga Prathamik Shikshak Samiti* but almost immediately after that an organisational crisis emerged and two separate organisations in the same name started to exist. Finally, in 1965, one of the organisations on which this discussion is based changed its name from *Paschimbonga Prathamik Shikshak Samiti* to *Nikhil Bongo Prathamik Shikshak Samiti* (ABPTA). See Nikhilbonga Prathamik Shikshak Samiti: *Sangram Andolone Nikhilbonga Prathamik Shikshak Samiti (1935-2005)*, vol. I, Netaji Institute for Asian Studies & Progressive Publishers, Kolkata, 2007. Also see Paschimbonga Prathamik Shikshak Samiti: *Paschimbonga Prathamik Shikshak Samiti Itihas in Prathamik Shikshak*, Vol No 1, January 15, 2009.

9. Nikhilbonga Prathamik Shikshak Samiti (2007-2009): *Sangram Andolone Nikhilbonga Prathamik Shikshak Samiti (1935-2005)* Vol. I-III; Netaji Institute for Asian Studies & Progressive Publishers, Kolkata,

10. [http://www.pcworld.com/article/129214/jobs\\_bashes\\_teachers\\_unions.html](http://www.pcworld.com/article/129214/jobs_bashes_teachers_unions.html)

In the following pages we divide the work into three parts, arranged in a temporal manner: the first part deals with the period between 1935 and 1947, the second looks at the period between 1947 and 1977, and the third examines critically the vital phase post-1977. By examining the different priorities that the union identified and pursued in these three phases we will try to find the continuities and disjunctures of the teachers' movement in West Bengal. Also, we will attempt to assess the impacts and implications of different actions taken by the organisation.

## I

### **Formation of the Nikhil Banga Prathamik Sikshak Samiti (ABPTA)**

The organisation was founded in 1935 with the name *Nikhil Bongo Prathamik School Shikshak Samiti*, which was changed to *Nikhil Bongo Prathamik Shikshak Samiti* in its second conference held in 1937. This was a time when the long-drawn political unrest in the country, mainly the movement for Independence, was at a pause. The Civil Disobedience Movement, launched by the Indian National Congress in 1930, was withdrawn. The "terrorist" armed movement in Bengal, which had at one point of time unnerved the British Government, had ceased. The world was passing through the Great Depression of the 1930s. The people of India were about to receive the Government of India Act, 1935<sup>11</sup> by which the provincial governments in British India got more power than what had been awarded through the Government of India Act, 1919.

At the societal plane, there was growing enthusiasm among the people for acquiring education. The disadvantaged sections of the people, namely, the Muslims, Dalits and women, came forward seeking education. The demand for massive expansion of primary education to remove the curse of illiteracy (only 8 per cent of the people of India were literate in 1931) was gaining a solid ground.<sup>12</sup> By this time the state system of primary education was established in Bengal as well as in India as a whole. This caused a rapid disappearance of the indigenous schools of education. Most of the provinces of British India passed their respective Primary Education Acts.<sup>13</sup> The Bengal (Rural) Primary Education Act, 1930, with the provision of making primary education free and compulsory, was passed. However, the implementation of the

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11. The bill duly passed into law in August, 1935 though came into effect in 1937. See, <http://en.wikipedia.org>

12. See Naik JP and Syed Nurullah: *A Students' History of Education in India 1800-1973*, The Macmillan Company of India Limited, Delhi-Bombay-Calcutta-Madras, 1974, 6<sup>th</sup> Revised Edition.

13. *Ibid*

Act was done at different times in different districts, and was in effect only in areas, "where the education cess was levied."<sup>14</sup> Due mainly to the limitations in the Act and the subsequent unmotivated government interventions, the task of universalisation of free and compulsory primary education did not gain any real momentum.

Large numbers of villages had no primary schools in their vicinity. The existing schools suffered from severe lack of infrastructure, including buildings, and teachers: a single teacher running an entire school<sup>15</sup> in a dilapidated building was a common picture in the rural areas. The discourse on primary education, at that time, was veering around mainly on two issues, namely, universalisation of free and compulsory primary education and the extremely low wages of primary teachers.<sup>16</sup> Amidst this discourse, primary teachers of Bengal, with full support from leaders of other spheres of the society, literary, academic, political, cultural and social, formed their own organisation and named it the *Nikhil Bongo Prathamik Shikshak Samiti*, with the main objective of advancement of primary education. This was an instance where the definitional problem mentioned at the beginning of this paper was created: the main objective of the organisation was NOT teachers' employment and financial security or ensuring incentives.<sup>17</sup>

### **Priorities selected in the founding conference (1935): Are not they still valid?**

*Nikhil Bongo Prathamik Shikshak Samiti* was formed in 1935 in a conference held at Sirajgunje of Pabna district (under present Bangladesh). Presented below are some of the major resolutions (from a total list of 32) that were adopted in the conference.

- This conference earnestly requests the Bengal Government to

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14. Narula Manju and Srilekha majumdar: *Educational Administration in West Bengal: Structures, Processes and Future Prospects*, NIPEA, New Delhi, 2001.

15. Naik JP and Syed Nurullah: *A Students' History of Education in India 1800-1973*, The Macmillan Company of India Limited, Delhi-Bombay-Calcutta-Madras, 1974, 6<sup>th</sup> Revised Edition.

16. The salary of the teachers was how much low that can be realised from a comment of Sarat Bose, the eminent political leader at that time, made in the 2<sup>nd</sup> conference of *Nikhil Bongo Prathamik Shikshak Samiti* in 1937, "the wages received by the primary teachers in Bengal was too small to meet the expenses of food of a dog or cat even".

17. The second resolution of the founding conference declared, "Let *Nikhil Bongo Prathamik School Shikshak Samiti* be formed in this conference to achieve the following objectives:

- i. Advancement of primary education in particular and education in general;
- ii. Development of fraternity and cordiality among the teachers of primary schools and Maqtab."

universalise immediately free and compulsory primary education in all districts of Bengal (Resolution – 9).

- This conference specially requests the Bengal Government to spend the maximum part of the revenue earned from the Central Government on jute tax for primary education (Resolution – 8).
- The teachers and the students can take up growing vegetables in the school complex provided there is some space available for this. This conference draws the attention of all teachers and the Education Department towards this (Resolution – 28).
- This conference requests the authority to appoint at least two teachers in the lower primary schools and at least three teachers in the upper primary schools (Resolution – 11).
- The scholarship examination for boys held at the lower primary level should be extended to the girls as well. (Resolution – 30).
- The *Adyabritti* (a kind of scholarship) meant for the girls is provided only to those who study in government or government-aided schools. This provision should be extended to girls studying in any school in order to bring all girls into the purview of this scholarship (Resolution – 31).
- Since the final primary examination centres are located only in the subdivisions, a problem is created particularly for poor students. Hence, this conference proposes to introduce more than one examination centre in convenient locations under each subdivision (Resolution – 29).
- This conference demands the formation of a committee for eliminating the errors noticed in the present curriculum of the primary schools. At least one member from the *Nikhil Bongo Prathamik Shikshak Samiti* should be a member of the aforesaid committee (Resolution – 26).
- This conference requests the authority to make an arrangement so that one representative can be elected by the primary teachers from each subdivision to the District School Board (Resolution – 17).
- There is provision for recruiting three external members in the Education Sub-Committee under article 65b of the District Board Act. This conference humbly requests the District Boards of Bengal to include two members selected by the district primary teachers' association among those three (Resolution – 22).

From these resolutions it is obvious that from the very beginning the organisation was vocal about the basic policies of primary education as

well as the overall development of primary education. While reflecting the growing demand among the masses for the universalisation of free and compulsory primary education (which started to gain momentum after the introduction of compulsory education throughout his state by the Gaekwar of Baroda in 1906<sup>18</sup>), the resolutions also gave some financial suggestions which could help in realising the goal of universalisation of primary education. The shortage of school teachers was a serious impediment to the delivery of quality education; tragically, the same problem continues to hinder the advancement of primary education even 75 years after this demand was first raised. The conference's attention towards the benefit of the poor and the female children is clearly reflected (see Resolutions 30, 31, 29). Importantly, the founding conference pointed out some basic problems in the education system – errors in the curriculum and text books – and offered solutions to eliminate the problems. Alas, the issue raised 75 years ago is still a terrible concern for people involved in the field of education.

In other words, from its very inception, the organisation did not keep itself confined to sectional demands only. Rather, in order to shoulder greater responsibility for the development of primary education, it demanded that elected representatives from among the teachers be made part of the decision-making bodies and processes of primary education. This too has not yet been realised fully. Despite the teachers' inclination towards participating in the process of policy-making the effective scope for doing so is still quite narrow.

### **Teachers' movement in the last years of the colonial period (1935–47)**

It has already been mentioned that during the formation of the ABPTA the demand for universalisation of free and compulsory primary education was already an issue in the public domain and was made a central issue in the ABPTA's founding conference and continued, thenceforth, to be echoed in all the conferences of this period. However, the issue did not receive the government's attention in the way it ought to have received. Sir Hasan Surawardi, the ex-Vice Chancellor of the University of Calcutta, made clear in his inaugural speech in the 1937 conference:

The government spends [a lot] for law and order, jail and the police department as it considers this expenditure indispensable. Similarly, if the ministry considered free and compulsory primary education as indispensable then it could be done in whatever way, even by cutting on the salaries of the ministers.

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18. Naik JP and Syed Nurullah: *A Students' History of Education in India 1800-1973*, The Macmillan Company of India Limited, Delhi-Bombay-Calcutta-Madras, 1974, 6<sup>th</sup> Revised Edition.

Moulavi Idris Ahmed, an MLA from Malda, maintained in the same conference that “till date we used to criticise the foreign government for not making proper arrangement for education. But if, even after 180 years of foreign rule, when Bengal has achieved autonomy, the ministry could not afford to spend at least one crore out of the 12 crore rupees for lower education then what is the use of getting autonomy of this kind?”

The ABPTA, however, raised in its conferences various financial suggestions to put before the government for allocating funds for the expansion of primary education. At the same time the motive of the government to impose the burden of expenditure for primary education on the general mass of people as the only alternative was opposed in the organisation’s 1938 conference. Thus, the ABPTA’s understanding seemed to be clear that primary education was to be made universal, free and compulsory without making the ordinary people shoulder the financially burden.

But making primary education free (free meaning free from tuition fees) and compulsory and allocation of budget accordingly does not, in itself, ensure the universalisation of primary education. This requires paying attention to many different aspects, prime among which is the accessibility of schools. If the distance of schools from the residences of children is large, then the dream of acquiring education fails at the very first step. That this was a genuine concern was reflected in the ABPTA’s 1945 conference where it demanded reducing the catchment area of each primary school to half-a-square mile from the prevalent norm of three square miles.

With this, the organisation also demanded adequate infrastructural facilities in schools – a non-negotiable requirement for the universalisation of primary education. We have seen from the resolutions of the first conference that the ABPTA raised the issue of shortage of teachers and demanded at least two teachers in each lower primary school and at least three teachers in each upper primary school. In 1937, this issue was raised in a different way: while demanding one teacher for each class it tried to bring a radical change in the policy of allocating teachers. It is a pity that this demand, raised by the ABPTA in 1937, is yet to be accepted even in principle and the people, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds, suffer most for this.<sup>19</sup> The other important demands included supply of adequate teaching equipment, arrangement of training for more teachers, arrangement of training for the Urdu and Hindi teachers of Kolkata (there was no

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19. The Right to Education Act, 2009 continued to follow the norms of number of teachers in a school on the basis of pupil strength for which in the schools of hinterlands where the population density is very low would never be able to get teacher on class basis resulting poor quality of education.

arrangement of training for them), etc. which show concern for the pedagogical aspect of primary education – a centrally important aspect.

The curricular aspect received attention in the first conference itself, but, special attention was seen from the 1937 conference where it suggested that teachers should select those textbooks which were favourable for the development of nationalism and patriotism among students (their ideological inclination also reflected through it), it also demanded that history, geography and physical education be made compulsory at the primary level and asked for five years of primary education instead of a proposed four years. It also took into account the Wardha Scheme of Basic Education, a concept developed by Gandhiji and accepted in the Conference of National Education at Wardha in 1937. The essence of Basic Education was learning through activity, i.e., educating children through some suitable form of manual productive work instead of educating them through books only. And this understanding found some reflection in the ABPTA. We find a resolution in the first conference in favour of growing vegetables in the school (mentioned earlier), the ABPTA also urged the government to organise agriculture in each primary school in 1937. But it considered the concept of Basic Education in a critical manner and in the 1938 conference it demanded that the Bengal government form a committee comprising experts on education to examine the applicability of the Wardha Scheme of Basic Education for the reform of primary education in Bengal instead of accepting it outright.

In a society divided on complex lines of class, caste, gender and so on, the success of universal primary education, in an effective sense, largely depends upon special emphasis on expanding it among the disadvantaged sections of the society. The ABPTA, nevertheless, focussed largely on the class issue and to some extent the issue of gender (Resolutions 29, 30 and 31 of the first conference). In the 1945 conference separate schools in more numbers for female children was demanded; the conference also demanded appointment, as far as possible, of female teachers in those schools.<sup>20</sup> But no resolution concerning the expansion of primary education among the Dalits and other disadvantaged sections of the society was found in any of the conferences. This is a bit surprising, for during the same period there had been a strong campaign led by Ambedkar and Gandhiji towards the upliftment of the Dalits. Nevertheless, in 1947, the ABPTA adopted a significant resolution that demanded that in areas predominated by Muslims the weekly school holiday should be

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20. At that time to expand education among the females it was necessary to open separate schools for the girls and for the same reason it was necessary to appoint there female teachers only to avoid the social constraints.

on Friday instead of Sunday. But, after 1947, there was no demand that was directly related to Muslims.

A remarkable resolution of the 1945 conference concerns the importance of people's participation in the delivery of primary education. This conference was held immediately after World War II and India – in common with the rest of the world – was going through a situation of severe political unrest, which might have served to undermine education in popular discourse, at least temporarily. The 1945 conference of the ABPTA regretted the 'indifferent attitude' of the people towards primary education and urged for giving primary education the highest priority. The same was repeated in the next conference of 1946. In order to remove the 'indifferent attitude' of the people it demanded in one resolution that a school management committee for each primary school composed of local people be constituted. This was an important move to involve ordinary people in primary education, presented way back in 1945, which has today become common in the development discourse.

Regarding inclusion of teachers in the decision making bodies of primary education we have already referred to the resolutions of the first conference that demanded elected representatives of the primary teachers in the District School Boards as well as the representation of district primary teachers' associations in the Education Sub-Committee. In 1937, the ABPTA went beyond the demand of representation of district primary teachers' associations in the Education Sub-Committee and raised the demand for inclusion of 'experienced primary teachers' in the said committee. The next conferences during the period upheld the demands raised in the first and second conferences.

From the above discussion, we can see that in its 13 years' journey<sup>21</sup> in the colonial period, the ABPTA raised many of the important issues related with the development of primary education – from expansion of primary education to proper infrastructure for primary schools; from curriculum to peoples' participation and so on. After recovering from the organisational crisis it faced during World War II that kept the organisation defunct for some time, it resumed paying attention towards the development of primary education. A severe economic crisis following World War II almost ruined the primary teachers: the salary paid to them was abysmally low and they had to go on a strike in 1947 (from 2 April to 29 April)<sup>22</sup> demanding

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21. However, the organisation was defunct during 1941-1944 and resumed activities in 1945. See Nikhilbonga Prathamik Shikshak Samiti: *Sangram Andolone Nikhilbonga Prathamik Shikshak Samiti (1935-2005)*, vol. I, Netaji Institute for Asian Studies & Progressive Publishers, Kolkata, 2007.

22. See Nikhilbonga Prathamik Shikshak Samiti: *Sangram Andolone Nikhilbonga Prathamik Shikshak Samiti (1935-2005)*, vol. I, Netaji Institute for Asian Studies & Progressive Publishers, Kolkata, 2007, p. 371.

enhancement of salary. Yet, the organisation did not seem to make any compromise with the cause of expansion of primary education.

However, there were limitations which one cannot ignore. Firstly, the ABPTA failed to pay special attention for the expansion of primary education among the disadvantaged sections, apart from females, of the society. The recommendations of mid-day meal, free textbooks, etc. made in the report of the Central Advisory Board of Education in 1944 (commonly known as the Sargent Report)<sup>23</sup> aimed at enhancement of education among the disadvantaged sections. The ABPTA demanded from 1945 the implementation of the Sargent Report. But, it never underlined in particular the issue of educational expansion among the disadvantaged sections.

One of the most important shortcomings of the ABPTA in the colonial period was its silence on some important contemporary political issues, including Independence, communal harmony, and so on. The question of Independence, which had an in-depth relation with the development of primary education, did not find any place in the resolutions of the entire period.<sup>24</sup> In the presidential address of the 1945 conference Hemendraprasad Ghosh, the ex-editor of *Basumati*, a leading vernacular daily of that time, maintained that the "main reason for the miserable condition of primary education in India was our colonial rule". Such an emphatic remark, however, failed to lead the meeting to adopt any resolution on Independence. Communal harmony was immensely relevant given the backdrop of the political rift between the Congress and the Muslim League immediately after World War II. The conflict led to the 1946 communal violence, the largest one of its kind that Bengal had seen in its history. However, the 1945 and 1946 conferences raised the demand of immediate release of political prisoners and asked the government to abandon its decisions to prosecute the soldiers of the Indian National Army. In a word, throughout this period the ABPTA largely kept itself away from the political issues, which were related closely – even if indirectly – with the expansion of education.

These weaknesses, however, do not make insignificant the efforts the ABPTA had made towards the development of primary education in Bengal during the colonial period. The commitment of the organisation to primary education far outweighs its limitations.

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23. See Naik JP and Syed Nurullah: *A Students' History of Education in India 1800-1973*, The Macmillan Company of India Limited, Delhi-Bombay-Calcutta-Madras, 1974, 6<sup>th</sup> Revised Edition.

24. The documents of the conference held in 1940 are not available.

## II

### **1947–77: ABPTA’s flourish**

Political changes in India brought through the transfer of power in 1947 had overriding implications in West Bengal – a fraction of the erstwhile Bengal province (the larger part was included in Pakistan and later became an independent country). The partition of the country had had severe socio-economic effects on West Bengal. However, the new Constitution of India which came into effect in 1950 imposed a responsibility on the state for universalising free and compulsory primary education throughout the country. It declared in its Directive Principles, “the state shall endeavour to provide, within a period of ten years from the commencement of this Constitution, for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of 14 years” (Article 45). Through this directive the public demand for universal free and compulsory primary education was given some constitutional legitimacy, though the realization of universal primary education was still a distant dream for many different reasons. The Directive Principle paid attention to the educational advancement of the marginalised sections, such as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Article 46 provided that, “the state shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and, in particular of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes ...”

The foundation of the Planning Commission in 1950 to formulate the development strategies of India had some potential role in the development of primary education. The first general election of India in 1952 ushered the journey of “Indian democracy” which paved the way for the participation of the people in the development process of primary education – however limited the scope of that participation might be.

Immediately after the transfer of power the ABPTA faced an organisational crisis and saw a split. The split in the organisation had some implications on the goals and achievements in the field of primary education. However the role that ABPTA played between 1947 and 1977 (from 1948 to 1965 in the name of *Paschimbanga Prathamik Shikshak Samiti*) for the development of primary education was indeed remarkable. According to the available reports and conference resolutions, this was the period when the ABPTA played the most remarkable part in its history. An analysis of the available materials shows that there had been some serious changes and development in the role of ABPTA during this period. A look into the issues raised and fought for by the ABPTA may throw some light on this.

### **On financial policy for allocating funds for primary education**

The demand for universal free and compulsory primary education raised by the ABPTA from its very inception took in this period many new dimensions. The financial suggestions (allocating funds for the universalisation of free and compulsory primary education) placed before the government at various conferences in the British period took a concrete shape. In a resolution of its 1953 conference it demanded that at least 25 per cent of the total revenue of West Bengal should be spent on education of which at least 50 per cent of the earmarked amount should be spent on primary education. The Central Government should spend 15 per cent of its revenue on education in which at least 40 per cent of the earmarked money should be spent on primary education. By defining the ratios of the government revenues to be spent on primary education, the ABPTA brought to the fore the priority regarding the expansion and development of primary education. At the same time, it pointed out that the central government could not avoid the responsibility of financing primary education: since education was a state subject there was anticipation that the central government would pass the financial burden on to the states. To ensure the financial role of the central government, the organisation took in its 1964 conference a resolution, which in some way went against the principle of federalism: it demanded amendment of the Constitution in order to enlist education as a concurrent subject. It was specifically demanded in the resolution that this amendment would facilitate the goal of the Constitution for providing free and compulsory education to children up to 14 years. It is another matter however that the same ABPTA opposed in 1975 the proposal of this amendment<sup>25</sup> and demanded in 1978 the revoking of the actual constitutional amendment made in 1976.

Nevertheless, at the end of this period the organisation seemed to have lost some of its radical colour. As can be seen from the records, the demand for financial allocation on education was fixed at 10 percent of the central budget, 30 percent of the state budget, 10 percent of the planned outlay and 6 percent of the GDP, but there was no mention as to what proportion of the expenditure on education should be earmarked for primary education. This was perhaps an important departure: the advancement of education everywhere in the world has depended largely on the heavy allocation of funds for primary education; unfortunately in India this share remained low and the shift in the ABPTA's focus on this issue added to

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25. See Nikhilbonga Prathamik Shikshak Samiti: *Sangram Andolone Nikhilbonga Prathamik Shikshak Samiti (1935-2005)*, vol. II, Netaji Institute for Asian Studies & Progressive Publishers, Kolkata, 2008, pp. 289-292.

the constraints of financing primary education.<sup>26</sup>

In the 1953 conference it was demanded that Education Tax be rationalised and the poor be exempted from it; it was suggested that the then prevailing norm of imposing tax on an income of Rs 50 per annum be modified to raise the level to Rs 1,500 per annum so as to bring into its purview the higher income groups. Also it suggested imposition of this tax on business houses of different kinds and various exportable items, narcotics, luxury items, and so on. The organisation could not however keep the priorities they fixed in this period intact (for example, silence on allocation of a larger share for primary education) and somehow confused the pivotal issue of primary education with that of some peripheral priorities.

### Access

The pro-people agenda of the ABPTA was manifested in its demands concerning access to schools. The demand for one primary school for each half square mile raised in 1945 was more radicalised in 1953 to ask for establishing primary schools in all school-less localities. In 1971 the Government of West Bengal – led by the Congress Party – declared that primary schools set up by the local people or voluntary organisations would not henceforth be given recognition.<sup>27</sup> Clearly, it went against the objective of universalisation of primary education and was opposed by the ABPTA (1971 conference). Also, to ensure the access of children to primary schooling, the ABPTA raised in this period some important demands. For example, the cost of textbooks and other stationery used to play an important role in the high drop out rate among children coming from marginalised and backward backgrounds. In the backdrop of the rising black marketing of textbooks in that period, the ABPTA demanded government action to stop this anti-poor and exclusionary practice. Similarly hunger in the classroom was also an important impediment for the continuation of education of this section of the population. After the introduction of cooked mid-day meal in 2003 in West Bengal we have seen how the attendance rate in primary schools has increased.<sup>28</sup> The question

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26. See Mehrotra S et al: *Universalising Elementary Education in India: Uncaging the Tiger Economy*; Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2005. Also see, review of this book, Rana Kumar (2006), "Education: An Evaluation", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 41, No. 03, January 21-27.

27. See Nikhilbonga Prathamik Shikshak Samiti: *Sangram Andolone Nikhilbonga Prathamik Shikshak Samiti (1935-2005)*, vol. II, Netaji Institute for Asian Studies & Progressive Publishers, Kolkata, 2008, p. 17

28. Pratichi Research Team (2005): *The Impact of the Mid-day Meal Programme in West Bengal*, Pratichi (India) Trust, Delhi. Also see, [www.righttofoodindia.org](http://www.righttofoodindia.org); Also see Rana K (2004) "The Possibilities of Mid-day Meal Programme in West Bengal" paper presented in the seminar *West Bengal: Choices and Challenges*, organized by the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Kolkata, on 27-28 August, 2004

of school uniform is also an important input; without this facility many children fail to attend school. Hence the ABPTA's demands, raised in its 1962 conference,<sup>29</sup> for free text books, stationery, school uniforms and mid-day meal, were crucially important for spreading education among all sections of children. Arrangements for mid-day meal and textbooks were recommended in the Sargent Report of 1944 (mentioned earlier). The ABPTA, however, did not make any specific move for these schemes, but demanded the overall implementation of the Sargent Report. In 1965, the association raised another important demand – that of a monthly health check up for the children in primary schools (a suggestion made in the Sargent Report). In other words, the demands raised in this period by the ABPTA directly linked the expansion of primary education with equal opportunity for all and advocated strong policy modification and action towards this direction.

### **Infrastructure**

The ABPTA had raised, in the colonial period, the issues of teacher shortage in primary schools (discussed earlier). This issue received continuous attention: in 1957 it demanded one teacher for each class, and one teacher for every 30 children. In addition to the demands that continued to be raised since its inception (repairing of school-buildings, supply of teaching equipment, etc.) the ABPTA highlighted in 1957 another infrastructural requirement – the demand for provision of drinking water in every school. Besides, increase in enrolment of children made it, in 1962, demand extension of school buildings. Precisely as regards infrastructural facilities, the organisation has consistently been following a line matching perfectly with the demand for universalisation of primary education.

### **Curriculum, Syllabus and Textbooks**

In the colonial period the ABPTA demanded to make history, geography and physical education compulsory in primary education and demanded five years of primary education. Besides, the association showed its inclination towards nationalism and patriotism in the curriculum. In the period in question (1947-77) it reflected on the curriculum, syllabus and textbooks. In 1962 the ABPTA adopted an important resolution related to the use of the mother tongue as

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29. It also raised this in a memorandum submitted to the Chief Minister of West Bengal prior to the 1962 Conference. (p 343, reference follows) The demand for Mid-day Meal came up as a conference resolution in 1962; it was indeed an extension of their earlier demand of serving the school children a tiffin submitted in 1958 to various Ministers and MLA (p. 217 reference follows). See Nikhilbonga Prathamik Shikshak Samiti: *Sangram Andolone Nikhilbonga Prathamik Shikshak Samiti (1935-2005)*, vol. I, Netaji Institute for Asian Studies & Progressive Publishers, Kolkata, 2007

the medium of education at all levels of education. In line with this, it demanded the provision of textbooks in languages other than the predominant language, Bangla – namely in Hindi, Urdu, Santali and Nepali (1964 conference). In 1963 it demanded a scientific and modern curriculum which would have consistency with other levels of education. In the same conference the ABPTA demanded that textbooks be made attractive. In 1964 it raised some intricate questions related to textbooks. In the 1962 conference it questioned the syllabus and demanded reform. In 1964 it raised objections regarding the subject contents of Bangla and History. In 1965 many of these demands on textbooks converged into the demand of simple and comprehensive text books. There were many instances in this period to show consistent efforts made by the ABPTA in order to rationalise the curriculum, syllabus and textbooks. In line with the demand for a peoples' education system, the ABPTA demanded in 1965 that teachers be involved in the process of preparation of text books; it was important from many different aspects particularly because of the teachers' day-to-day activities which gave them opportunities to evaluate the related necessities more accurately. Today this is not a much-debated issue<sup>30</sup> (although in practice such an arrangement is yet to be fully made), but at that time this was, in fact, a radical deliberation.

The ABPTA's struggle for a scientific and modern curriculum and syllabus and textbooks prepared accordingly compelled the government in 1974 to form a Syllabus Committee.<sup>31</sup>

### **Pedagogy**

A major change in pedagogical issues was seen in this period. The demand related to the provision of opportunities for all teachers to receive training raised in the colonial period was taken much further: in 1962 the ABPTA demanded initiation of modern and scientific methods of training for all teachers. It was a major development in their role for the development of primary education as it related the delivery of education with scientific methods, which would attract children to the classroom.

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30. The Report of the National Advisory Committee set up by the Ministry of Human Resource Development under the Chairmanship of Prof. Yash Pal in 1992 recognised an important role of the teachers in education besides classroom teaching and recommended for the increase of teachers' involvement in the process of curriculum framing and preparation of textbooks. See *Learning Without Burden: Report of the National Advisory Committee Appointed by the Ministry of Human Resource Development*, <http://www.ncert.nic.in/html/learn.htm>

31. See Nikhilbonga Prathamik Shikshak Samiti: *Sangram Andolone Nikhilbonga Prathamik Shikshak Samiti (1935-2005)*, vol. II, Netaji Institute for Asian Studies & Progressive Publishers, Kolkata, 2008, p. 349.

### **Concern for the expansion of primary education among the disadvantaged**

The issues of children of disadvantaged backgrounds – somewhat neglected in the ABPTA's agendas in the pre-Independence period – found some ground in the 1947-77 period: the demands for free textbooks, uniforms, mid-day meals and the opportunity of education through the mother tongue, etc. had special relevance for the marginalised sections of the society.<sup>32</sup> The demand for free and compulsory primary education for Hindi and Urdu schools (raised in 1965) or the deeper concern shown (in 1953) for educational opportunities for the refugees of West Bengal (who immigrated following the partition of the country in 1947) are clearly linked with the ABPTA's concern for the weaker sections of the society.

### **Peoples' Participation**

In the colonial period the ABPTA showed its concern for the “indifferent attitude of the people regarding primary education”, and suggested formation of school committees comprising local people who could be involved in the delivery of primary education. Unfortunately, in the period in question (1947-77) no such initiative can be found. In 1962 we find a resolution that aimed at developing a relationship with the people and parents for the expansion of primary education, but we do not find any concrete steps in that direction. In a resolution of 1957 it was discussed in a different context (against the politically-motivated transfers of primary teachers) that in the interest of primary education it was necessary to build up close relationship of teachers with parents and local people. In order to make this possible, it was suggested that the teachers should be posted in their own villages or within two miles of their villages. Peoples' role in the development of primary education was seldom recognised.

### **Demand for New Legislation for Primary Education and Structural Changes**

The British policy of separate Primary Education Acts for rural and urban areas was continuing even in the post colonial period. This posed many problems for the expansion of primary education in West Bengal. For example, the Rural Primary Education Act 1930 made

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32. Though social disadvantage or identity-originated backwardness has never found a place in the ABPTA's agenda, rather it relied heavily upon the notion of economic disadvantage; in effect the demands mentioned above had indirectly benefited the socially deprived sections. Nevertheless, seeing the problems from economic point of view only had taken its toll – the absence of special attention towards the uplift of the socially backward sections had resulted in lower literacy rate among the Adivasis, Dalits and Muslims; lower level of educational achievements among them, and so on.

primary education free and compulsory in certain parts of rural areas where the education cess was levied. Again, according to the Municipal Primary Education Act 1919 the sole responsibility for the delivery of primary education in urban areas was on the municipal bodies which faced severe difficulties in performing the devolved duties. The West Bengal Urban Primary Education Act 1963 which replaced the Municipal Primary Education Act 1919 was also not effective. The existence of separate authorities for primary education was a stumbling block for bringing uniformity to the delivery of primary education. Aiming to remove all these difficulties, the ABPTA placed demands in 1957 and onward for a new and comprehensive Act on primary education combining both the rural and urban areas. It demanded in the same conference (1957) a single authority for primary education where a central board of primary education would be the highest authority in the state.

According to that demand the district boards of primary education would be the highest authorities in the respective districts for both rural and urban areas, and the district boards would function under the central board of primary education of the state. This demand was aimed at a radical change in the structure of the organisation of primary education. For the solution of the problem of the children of class V – in most of the cases, this class was attached to the high schools – it demanded in the same conference (1957) that class V be attached to the primary schools.

### **Primary teachers' participation in decision-making bodies**

In the 1953 conference the ABPTA made some significant departures in its line of inclusion of teachers in policy-making bodies: while in the pre-Independence period the demand was to incorporate in the District School Board (DSB) one representative from among the primary teachers of each sub-division, the new resolution wanted to widen the scope of teachers' participation in the decision-making bodies. It was demanded that one third of the members of the DSB be incorporated from among the teachers. Also, it went a step a further to suggest the method of formation of the board.<sup>33</sup> It further added that the proposed West Bengal Primary Education Board should be constituted from the members of the DSBs through indirect voting, along the same line of the district boards. In 1957, it advocated the inclusion of primary

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33. The Board Members suggested to be one third from the primary teachers (to be elected by them), one third from the elected representatives of the autonomous bodies and legislative bodies of the respective districts and the remaining one third from the educationists of the respective districts (to be elected by the persons of the respective districts having the minimum qualification of Matriculation).

teachers in the All India Primary Education Council, formed by the Government of India. These demands were quite substantial, particularly in the context of democratisation of the primary education system.

### **Pre-primary education**

Except for the fact that it demanded the implementation of the Sargent Report, which recommended pre-primary education for children between 3 and 6 years of age,<sup>34</sup> the ABPTA did not raise, during the colonial period, any special demand regarding this. The understanding of pre-primary education started developing in the ABPTA in 1963, when it demanded immediate establishment of nursery schools all over the country and opening pre-primary sections in primary schools.<sup>35</sup> The demand for opening pre-primary classes in primary schools continues to be echoed till date. However, the understanding on pre-primary schooling does not seem to have developed in a fuller manner: although the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), the largest child programme in the world, has been in operation in the country – however weak the functionality may be – the ABPTA has not perhaps paid much attention to this. Mention may be made here that it was the lack of public grumbling that was responsible, at least partially, for the poor delivery of the pre-school education (PSE) programme in the ICDS.<sup>36</sup> It is somewhat unfortunate that the ABPTA, which has had many positive influences on primary education and other social issues, could not focus on the crucially important ICDS programme.

The above discussion shows that in concert with changes in situations the ABPTA had raised in the period of 1947-77 many new aspects concerned with the development of primary education. In this period the organisation made some important qualitative contributions to the movement for the development of primary education in the state. It was in this period when the ABPTA clearly developed some understanding and fought accordingly for the universalisation of free and compulsory primary education in its effective sense. The raising of

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34. See Naik JP and Syed Nurullah: *A Students' History of Education in India 1800-1973*, The Macmillan Company of India Limited, Delhi-Bombay-Calcutta-Madras, 1974, 6<sup>th</sup> Revised Edition.

35. Actually it started to develop from 1955. It is found to demand for pre primary education under the responsibility of the state in the *Secretary's Report* of 1955 conference but the resolutions of that conference are not available.

36. For a detailed discussion on this see Pratichi Research Team: *The Pratichi Child Report: A Study on the Delivery of the ICDS Programme in West Bengal*. Pratichi (India) Trust, Delhi, 2009.

the issues of access, infrastructure, curriculum, and more particularly the systemisation and democratisation of the delivery of primary education sowed the seeds for further expansion of primary education among all sections of the children in the coming phases.

Nevertheless, there have been some weaknesses that had some negative impact on the expansion of primary education. One of the major weaknesses was at the level of understanding: following the Directive Principle of the Constitution of India the ABPTA repeatedly urged for free and compulsory education for all children in the age group of 6-14 years but *never raised this demand as the fundamental right of the children*. Another weakness was associated with its adherence to a particular line of political activity. However, since at this period the political patronage the organisation received was in the opposition there was not much distraction in the organisation's nature of struggle. For example, the organisation played a glorious role in organising the teachers, not only against economic discrimination but also on various larger issues. It had been active in the food movement of 1966, in the movements for peace and against aggression on third world countries by powerful nations, and so on.

Nevertheless, the rigidity in the question of political alliance resulted in the ABPTA organising, in 1967, elections in support of certain groups,<sup>37</sup> and formulating, in 1969 (when the left forces in alliance with others formed the government in West Bengal), the slogan "*Sangramer Hatiyar Juktafront Sarkar – the United Front Government is the weapon of our struggle*". The seed sown through the slogan later yielded the commitment to protect the "Left Front Government" that came to power in 1977 "like our eyeballs." (We will discuss this presently.)

Notwithstanding all this, the ABPTA organised in this period a strong social movement for the development of primary education in West Bengal and had been successful in bringing forth certain changes, important among which was the new legislation on primary education of West Bengal – the Primary Education Act of 1973. There was introduction of school-food in the form of tiffin (bread) which raised hopes for the expansion of primary education among the disadvantaged sections of the society. A syllabus committee was formed in 1974 to bring changes in the curriculum, syllabus and textbooks. These were important changes in which the ABPTA had been quite influential. Above all, the struggles developed by them in this period laid the

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37. See Nikhilbonga Prathamik Shikshak Samiti: *Sangram Andolone Nikhilbonga Prathamik Shikshak Samiti (1935-2005)*, vol. I, Netaji Institute for Asian Studies & Progressive Publishers, Kolkata, 2007, p. 727.

foundation for many changes in primary education in the post-1977 period.

### III

#### **Development in the post-1977 period**

When the Left Front assumed office in West Bengal in 1977, primary education in the state was not in satisfactory shape. Many children, particularly from the disadvantaged sections, could not even attend school. The number of villages without a primary school was large.<sup>38</sup> A scheme of providing some food to children was launched but the scale was modest and the impact was low. In 1978, the drop out rates in class II, class III and class IV were 54.8 percent, 64.6 percent and 77 percent respectively.<sup>39</sup> A committee was constituted in 1974 to bring changes in curriculum, syllabus and textbooks, but the actual functioning of the committee never took place. The new Primary Education Act 1973, was also largely not implemented.<sup>40</sup> There were many problems to be solved. So in its first conference of this period, in 1978, the ABPTA had to raise almost all of those issues which were raised in the period 1947-77. Some of those demands were solved in this period, but many things continued to remain unaddressed. Though in terms of organisational strength the ABPTA flourished tremendously, in terms of keeping its nature of struggle intact it restricted itself to certain agendas that fit a particular line of protecting the newly set up government. Notwithstanding many important contributions, in this period the organisation seemed not to do justice to its tradition.

#### **On financial policy for allocating funds for primary education**

We have found above that in the 1947-77 period the ABPTA made particular mention regarding educational expenditure to be made through various provisions (10 percent, 30 percent, 10 percent and 6 percent of the central budget, state budget, planned outlay and GDP respectively). But it largely kept silent on the states' share in primary education. And, after 1977, on all the occasions of deliberating on financial allocations for education, the ABPTA remained silent on the educational expenditure in the state budget. It is true that in the initial stage of Left Front rule in West Bengal the expenditure on education

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38. According to the Report of the Education Commission August 1992, the number of primary schools increased by 10,080 in West Bengal between 1976-77 and 1991-92 which gives some idea about the number of school less villages at that time. See *Report of the Education Commission August 1992*, Government of West Bengal.

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

40. *Ibid*

increased (according to the Report of the Education Commission August 1992, the overall outlay on education as proportion of total budgetary outlay exceeded 25 per cent, and was closer to 30 percent, in the middle 1980s<sup>41</sup>) hence it might have been considered unimportant during the early years of Left rule. But, in the later days of Left rule the expenditure on education was reduced<sup>42</sup> and despite this hard reality the organisation did not say anything regarding this vital issue. It is not just the issue of the state's budgetary provision for education, the ABPTA has seemed to undermine the crucially important aspect of the allocation and distribution of the state's education budget. West Bengal had been maintaining its status of lower allocation in primary education all through the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>43</sup> But the ABPTA, which had so vociferously acted for the cause of universal primary education, did not raise its voice on this highly discriminatory issue.

### Access

Immediately after assuming power, the Left Front made some important interventions in education, including making education up to the class 12 level free, providing primary school children with textbooks and uniforms, and opening new primary schools. The demand of free textbooks for all classes at primary level was achieved in this period, but there was a problem in providing these textbooks in time or in terms of their availability in languages other than Bengali. ABPTA rightly raised its voice for the cause.

Nevertheless, the problem of access to school (despite establishing some new ones) continued to be a major obstacle in the way of universalisation of primary education. The Annual Report 2000-01 of the Department of School Education shows that there were 11,875 localities in West Bengal which did not have access to a school within one kilometre, and for 1,935 of them the accessibility was above two kilometres.<sup>44</sup> The launching of the Sishu Siksha Karmasuchi in 1998 has solved this problem to some extent, but the number of villages without schools was still found to be 969.<sup>45</sup> Yet surprisingly, instead of spearheading the teachers' movement, in line with the organisation's declared objective of universalisation of primary education, towards broadening the opportunity of schooling through access

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41. *Ibid*

42. In the annual meeting of ABPTA in 1996 it noticed this aspect but it did not get place in its conference resolutions. See Nikhilbonga Prathamik Shikshak Samiti: *Sangram Andolone Nikhilbonga Prathamik Shikshak Samiti (1935-2005)*, vol. III, Netaji Institute for Asian Studies & Progressive Publishers, Kolkata, 2009, p. 492.

43. Mehrotra S. et al (2005), op. cit.

44. Pratichi Research Team: *Pratichi Siksha Pratibedar*. Dey's Publishing, Kolkata, 2004, p. 111.

45. Pratichi Research Team: *The Pratichi Education Report II: Primary Education in West Bengal: Changes and Challenges*. Pratichi (India) Trust, Delhi, 2009, p. 151.

and other means, the ABPTA reduced itself to merely applauding the government's limited interventions (it is of course important to give the government credit for what it has done, but that does not justify not criticising it for what it has not done).

It was perhaps the excessive tilting towards the government that resulted in developing in the ABPTA some major misunderstandings. For example, on the issue of mid-day meal it took in 1998 a position which went against the interests of the children. When, in 1995, the central government launched the national programme of cooked mid-day meal (National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education) across the country the Government of West Bengal decided to distribute food grains instead of cooked mid-day meals among the children. That such a pro-child organisation like the ABPTA, which had been demanding the launching of a mid-day meal scheme since 1962, did not show any dissent was surprising. Despite this, when the cooked mid-day meal programme was finally launched in the state in 2003-04, the ABPTA played a pivotal role. While contributing positively to the operational aspects of the cooked mid-day meal programme, the organisation has actually also been instrumental in launching this programme in some cases, particularly in Kolkata.<sup>46</sup>

### **Curriculum, Syllabus and Textbooks**

Immediately after assuming power the Left Front Government made two interventions of a radical nature in the primary education sector – withdrawing English as a subject at the primary level and introducing a continuous evaluation system with a “no detention” policy replacing the examination system at the primary level. Both these decisions created tremendous hue and cry in West Bengal society; indeed, the debate on English continued to be carried on for about two decades until the Government reinstated English at the primary level in 1999.<sup>47</sup>

The role of the ABPTA in this regard was somewhat mixed: it welcomed the West Bengal Government's decisions, and perhaps rightly so. When the Government set up a one-man- commission – headed by Professor Pabitra Sarkar – to examine re-introduction of English at the primary level, the ABPTA gave witness before the Pabitra Sarkar Commission against this.<sup>48</sup> But, surprisingly, when, following the Commission's

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46. Pratichi Research Team: *The Pratichi Report on Mid-day Meal: The Mid-day Meal Programme in Urban Primary and Rural Upper Primary Schools in West Bengal*, Pratichi (India) Trust, Delhi, 2010.

47. In 1999 English was reinstated for all the classes at primary level except class I and in 2004 it was done for class I too.

48. See Nikhilbonga Prathamik Shikshak Samiti: *Sangram Andolone Nikhilbonga Prathamik Shikshak Samiti (1935-2005)*, vol. III, Netaji Institute for Asian Studies & Progressive Publishers, Kolkata, 2009, pp. 665-672.

recommendation, the Government re-inducted English at the primary level the ABPTA choose to close the issue for good without registering any protest.

On the question of scientific and modern curriculum and syllabus, the ABPTA accepted outright the curriculum framework suggested by the syllabus committee in 1980. In a resolution titled “in favour of the education policy of the Left Front government” this new curriculum was highly applauded in the 1982 conference and onwards, but surprisingly, the ABPTA did not utter a single word to point out the flaws in the syllabus framed by the committee. More so, the organisation that had been fighting tenaciously since its inception for a scientific curriculum, syllabus and textbooks suddenly stopped its reasoning on the issue during the Left Front regime (it has, however, rightly opposed some of the moves to change the curriculum towards a reactionary direction by the NDA Government; but not raising simultaneously the issues at home had had some impact in belittling its role). It is only lately (2009-10) that the organisation has once again started raising its voice on this issue.<sup>49</sup> It is true that their demand of involving teachers in the process of framing the syllabus was partially met, but for all practical purposes, as anybody can see, this inclusion was more a formality than effective participation. As a result, the curriculum, syllabus or textbooks still require several – and in some case radical – changes.<sup>50</sup> That the ABPTA has added importance to this issue in recent times is certainly a welcome move, which should yield positive results.

### **Structural changes in the organisation of primary education**

The Primary Education Act 1973, which practically came into effect in the post-1977 period, removed many of the organisational difficulties of primary education. As per the Act the state level board for primary education was established in this period. The district level boards – combining both rural and urban areas – were brought under its jurisdiction. However, the ABPTA’s demand for democratisation was not fully met :

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49. In 2009-10 it has participated as well as organised some meetings with Pratichi (India) Trust on it.

50. The Report of the National Advisory Committee set up by the Ministry of Human Resource Development under the Chairmanship of Prof. Yash Pal in 1992 discussed a lot regarding the shortcomings in curriculum, syllabus and textbooks. See *Learning Without Burden: Report of the National Advisory Committee Appointed by the Ministry of Human Resource Development*, <http://www.ncert.nic.in/html/learn.htm>. The recent Pratichi study has suggested to bring reform in the present curriculum, syllabus and text books in West Bengal while considering it as one of the sources of increasing tendency for private tuition. See Pratichi Research Team: *The Pratichi Education Report II: Primary Education in West Bengal: Changes and Challenges*. Pratichi (India) Trust, Delhi, 2009

- (a) the ratio of teachers' representation was lower than what was actually demanded, and
- (b) though the membership to the board was decided largely on the basis of election, the State Government retained the power to appoint the Chairperson, who enjoyed the bulk of power.

There are many other shortcomings in the Act. Not just this, the demand to attach class V with the primary school, which is an important aspect in the organisation of primary education and found to be raised repeatedly in the 1947-77 period, still remained unfulfilled. The ABPTA raised the issue before the Education Commission,<sup>51</sup> but did not discuss it seriously in its conferences.

Therefore, the ABPTA's demand was met only partially. But, perhaps due to its commitment of protecting the Left Front Government "like our eyeballs" it did not exert its strength to attain its declared objectives.

### **Peoples' Participation**

In this period the ABPTA made some important interventions, including laying emphasis on the role of teachers in the delivery of primary education, demanding strengthening of the inspection system and above all ensuring the quality of education. In almost all the conferences between 1990 and 2007 the ABPTA laid special emphasis on the role of teachers. However, in the discussion of the period 1947-77 we saw that, in contrast to the colonial period, there was not much significance in the role of ABPTA to involve the larger section of people in the process of the delivery of primary education. This weakness continued to minimize the role of the organisation during most of the post-1977 period. Even though the question of the quality of education appeared to take centre stage at the level of the ABPTA's organisational movement (manifested in the stressing on infrastructural development, proper implementation of the incentive schemes, pedagogical aspects, teachers' responsibility in the school as well as in the class room, and so forth), the failure to formulate a pragmatic line of action to involve the larger public in the operational process of primary education somehow resulted in making the ABPTA's role less visible. In 1992 it put forth before the State Education Commission (popularly known as the Ashok Mitra Commission)<sup>52</sup> the importance of peoples' initiative for the solution of many problems of the schools but

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51. See Nikhilbonga Prathamik Shikshak Samiti: *Sangram Andolone Nikhilbonga Prathamik Shikshak Samiti (1935-2005)*, vol. III, Netaji Institute for Asian Studies & Progressive Publishers, Kolkata, 2009, p. 31.

52. See Nikhilbonga Prathamik Shikshak Samiti: *Sangram Andolone Nikhilbonga Prathamik Shikshak Samiti (1935-2005)*, vol. III, Netaji Institute for Asian Studies & Progressive Publishers, Kolkata, 2009, p. 37.

this understanding was not found to be discussed much in the conferences held before 2005.

Of late, however, the ABPTA has been exerting a lot of energy in this direction. In a resolution of 2005, we find a significant development in this regard: the peoples' role in the development of primary education was recognised. And, as it appears, the organisation's present line of action has been relying substantially on this aspect.

### **Privatisation of Education**

The ABPTA has been opposing, almost since its inception, the proposals for and attempts at commercialisation and privatisation of education in the country. However, with the growing emergence of a private market for education since the early nineteen-eighties the organisation launched a pin-pointed attack on the central government's policies leading to privatisation of education in a more orchestrated manner. In order to check the burgeoning of private schools the ABPTA emphasised upon financial provision for education: it demanded that 10 percent of the union budget and 6 percent of the GDP be earmarked for education. Nevertheless, while organizing movements against privatization, the ABPTA seemed to fail to see the developments in West Bengal. By the mid-eighties privatization of education had become a well-grounded phenomenon. While larger economic and social influences had their definite impact on this, some of the decisions taken by the West Bengal Government had actually encouraged the desire of a section of parents to enroll their children in private schools. Two of the government's decisions, namely, withdrawal of English from the primary syllabus and introduction of continuous evaluation system with a "no detention" policy at primary level, created a lot of antagonism, especially among urban middle class parents. At this juncture, the role of the ABPTA was expected to be very crucial. On the one hand the historically-evolved relevance of the organisation demanded from it a two-pronged movement:

- (a) to carry on a discussion among parents and other members of society on the scientific basis of the decisions of the government, and
- (b) to launch a movement to make the government provide fuller opportunities for education to all sections of children with equity, to ensure quality education for all, and making effective arrangements for imposing regulatory measures on private schools in order to bring about some uniformity in the curriculum and teaching-learning practices.

Although the ABPTA took a correct stand to stand by the government, the larger role that was expected of it was absent. The

absence of a massive social debate on the delivery of education and other practical measures gave way to the burgeoning of private schools in the urban areas. The urban middle class, which has acquired through the socio-political and economic dynamics of society the ability to raise its voice against the poor delivery of education in the public schools, found it safe to resort to private modes of schooling (banking mainly on private schools). Had the ABPTA, and other mass organisations, played a positive role this change could have taken a positive direction.

It was really a crucial moment: millions of children in West Bengal were waiting for equitable delivery of primary education. Their parents wanted them to acquire the basic skills that could empower them to protect the rights – however limited – acquired through political and social mobility, and enhance them further. But, governmental inaction was seen on two counts: first to meet the demand for education among the masses, and second to develop regulatory measures for private schooling. But the absence of the expected role of the teachers' unions to countervene privatisation in an effective manner made the situation precarious.

The consequences of the above were not confined only to the urban areas. The middle-class demand “back English and the examination system at primary level” simply outmanoeuvred the other central issues, including establishing more schools (there were many villages, particularly inhabited by the underdogs, without any schooling facility), emphasis on universal enrolment and zero drop out (large number of children remained out of school and the phenomenon continues to the present time), streamlining teachers' distribution (the state has been suffering from the congenital shortage of teachers in the marginalised areas), more attention towards an equitable and quality education (absenteeism of teachers and lacklustre functioning of state-run primary schools became almost a norm), and so on.

One of the counter-productive impacts of the above was the emergence of a different kind of privatisation in the rural areas: dependence upon private tutors. The lack of attention to the core issues of primary education gave way to the relatively affluent section of rural parents resorting to private tutors. The urban middle class phenomenon of not grumbling against the system but finding individual means for children's education (private school) percolated down to the rural areas, albeit, in a different form, i.e. private tuition (since the rural areas of West Bengal did not offer lucrative opportunities to investors to establish private schools).

The ABPTA's weaknesses in organising and leading a cohesive movement on these issues has not only added to the overemphasis on the traditionalities (detention in class, English learning at primary level,

etc.) and created a sort of unipolarity in education (since the poor did not have any voice the rich monopolised it), but also resulted in the demotivation of a section of teachers that, in effect, resulted in a sort of opportunism, and even, among a section of teachers no matter how small in number, perversion.

In the post-1977 period the numerical strength of the ABPTA increased substantially. Thanks to the Left Front government's policies of job security and other benefits extended for the teachers, the organisation found it easier than earlier: issues related with salaries and other service norms were taken care of and hence there was no immediate need for movements on these issues. This gave the organisation a much better opportunity to take the basic issue of quality and equality in the delivery of education, something that has been in the core agenda of the ABPTA. However, whether this goal was seriously pursued in this period is not something above question. What could be seen from the documents of this period are fully indicative of the organisation's shifting its attention more towards protecting the government than on the proper delivery of primary education in the state. It took a strong position (in the 1978 conference) "to be constantly vigilant to protect the Left Front government, the ally of the struggles, as our eyeballs."

There was perhaps nothing wrong in this, but the problem arose with the balancing of the agendas: to protect the government and at the same time to remain firm in the earlier commitment to quality and equality in education. As it appears, the commitment to protect the government demanded so much attention that the primary commitment lost its relevance – not in words, but in effect. This resulted in a complete silence on part of the organisation in urgent matters of financing primary education, expansion of the school system, and so on. Even in matters where the organisation could have had direct influence, such as distribution of teachers (the asymmetry of which resulted in concentration of teachers in the urban and semi-urban areas while schools in the remote areas had to get by with a single teacher), it seemed not to take up these issues seriously. It has been demanding a cooked mid-day meal since 1960s. But when the Central Government launched the *National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education* in 1995 it did not seem to respond positively: the programme was supposed to provide a cooked mid-day meal to the children, but most of the state governments, including the Government of West Bengal, distributed uncooked rice among the children (at the rate of 3 kgs per student per month). This did not have any impact on the children's nutrition. The ABPTA, being a vocal advocate of the mid-day meal was

expected to take the initiative on the implementation of the cooked meal programme in the state, but it somehow stood by the government.

However, of late, the ABPTA is being seen to be engaged in fulfilling some of its commitments. Increase of enrolment and attendance, improvement of quality, stopping negligence and absenteeism by teachers, etc. have become the central agenda. The organisation has played a very crucial role in the implementation of the cooked mid-day meal programme when, following the Supreme Court order, the state government finally launched this programme in 2003. These are welcome indications of the organisation's reassuming some of its positive roles. Whether the indications will become reality depends much upon the settling of some ideological issues, no matter which government comes to power.

### **Conclusion**

The discussion above shows with some degree of certainty that the activities of the ABPTA, particularly during 1947-77, had a very positive role in the development of primary education in West Bengal. Seeds of a social movement sown in the colonial period flourished into a larger and committed organisational shape. The efforts made by the ABPTA in the period 1947-77 resulted in some major changes in the primary education sector of West Bengal.

However, in the post-1977 period its complete alignment with the state government has seemed to have caused a lot of damage. The total submission to the government led to the organisation compromising with its main priority of ensuring quality and equality in education. In context of primary education, the teachers' organisations have a central role to create a sort of social pressure, which could not be seen during the post-1977 period. And the absence of such a pressure took its toll.

Both the strengths and the weaknesses of the organisation have had major bearings on the advancement of primary education in particular and the development sector in general. We may learn a striking lesson: in the colonial period the ABPTA found larger support from the social leaders of Bengal. The second conference of the organisation held in 1937 was chaired by no less than Acharya Prafulla Chandra Roy, the legendary scientist and social re-creator. The conferences held in the colonial period were attended by a number of political and social leaders. Visionaries like Rabindranath Tagore and Jawaharlal Nehru sent their wishes to the delegates of the conferences. In a word, the teachers' organisation was not confined to the problems related to the occupational aspects of the teachers; rather it became a broader platform for advancing the cause of peoples' education in the country.

But, as days went by the platform went on shrinking: first, the

division of the organisation on the basis of political understanding left little room for free thinking and liberal association of people concerned with education. While the narrowing down of the vision of the teachers' organisations had much to do with the shrinkage in liberal support for and association with the organisation, the changes at the societal plane had perhaps played a role in this disconnect. The social orientation among the intelligentsia generated out of a nationalist motivation on the one hand and left political enthusiasm on the other perhaps started to dry out. In line with the political shift in West Bengal, where people-centric movements were replaced by narrow partisan interests, particularly after the 1970s, newer priorities among the educated middle class drove them away from the cause of mass education in particular and people-centric causes in general. To illustrate we may remember that in the decades of the 1980s and 1990s, the issue of primary education that arrested the minds of the intelligentsia was the teaching of English at the primary level; other issues, namely, establishment of schools, appointment of teachers, facilitation of educational opportunities for the disadvantaged sections, received no attention from the enlightened classes. The absence of such social pressure has perhaps contributed to

- (a) the teachers' associations' taking an alienated and even partisan route, and
- (b) widening the gap between the teachers and other sections of the society.

Such a conclusion finds further ground from the current emphasis on some basic issues – universalisation of primary education, implementation of the cooked mid-day meal, etc. – both by the teachers' unions and society at large. Of course, it is not easy to measure the reciprocal influences – of the teachers' unions and the larger society. But, that these two trends have occurred simultaneously cannot but have some connections. This recognition is important; but, more important is to explore and strengthen this connection further.