

Small Schools for the Underprivileged : The SSK experiment in West Bengal

Kumar Rana, Santabhanu Sen and Manabesh Sarkar
Pratichi (India) Trust*

Abstract: In spite of several policy declarations and attempts sections of people in the country remained out of the orbit of educational and other social opportunities. In West Bengal a special programme was designed in 1997-8 to meet the challenge and a sort of small schools were established in the areas to cater to the disadvantaged children. As on today there are 16005 such schools, called the Sishu Siksha Kendra (SSK), which consist about 15 percent of the total children enrolled at the primary level. The paper suggests that despite a long tradition of class based political movements West Bengal continues to suffer from some traditional social discriminations. The secondary data and field level observations clearly point out towards the particular disadvantages of the socially backward communities – the Dalits, Adivasis and Mussalmans – in terms of access to educational opportunities. While recognising the immense contribution of the small schools – the SSKs – towards meeting the goal of universal education the paper raises some questions concerned with equality and justice.

Introduction

What is a small school? Is it defined by the number of students enrolled in it? If so, what is the ideal number? Or, there are other parameters, such as curriculum, for defining small school? Or, is it based on the qualification of teachers? This paper, however, does not attempt to seek answer to the definitional question of small school. Rather, it assumes – in particular context of rural West Bengal– a kind of government run primary schooling institutions, called the Sishu Siksha Kendra (SSK) to be small. The main basis of considering these schools as small is that they are established – or supposed to be established – by the Department of Panchayat and Rural Development, Government of West Bengal in areas with difficulty in accessing the regular primary schools (PS) run by the Department of School Education, Government of West Bengal. Primary education in the rural areas of West Bengal is mainly catered to the children by the two types of institutions – the primary schools and the SSKs. The SSKs are located in the areas inhabited mainly by the Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST) and Muslims. In fact, nearly 80 percent of the children enrolled in the SSKs are from these three communities, who are traditional underdogs in West Bengal society. In other words, the SSKs are the schools for the underprivileged, and they are small in both sense – number wise and status wise. They are not only attended by the children of the backward communities but are also run by low-paid teachers. Also, there is a substantial difference

* The authors are indebted to Saumik Mukherjee, Arabinda Nandy, Paromita Haldar and Sumanta Pal, all colleagues at Pratichi Trust for their support at different stages. We are also grateful to Mechbahar Seikh of the Paschimbanag Rajya Sishu Siksha Mission for his generous help.

between the training level of the teachers of the SSK and that of the primary schools. These differences apart there are substantial differences in the governance of the two types of the school. Indeed, it is the mode of governance of the SSK – a system that has a higher degree of community involvement – that has primary been responsible for the sustenance of the SSKs. Nevertheless, while these small schools have to some extent been successful in catering the educational need of the backward groups there is a central question concerned with equality. While the children of the advantaged sections of the society should have the opportunities of fully equipped primary schools why should the children of the disadvantaged be devoid of that opportunity? Why should the teachers of the SSKs, generally women, be paid much lower a salary (at least three times less) than their PS counterparts?

There are different views and counterviews at different levels. Based on empirical data and other evidences, this paper aims to draw, (a) the background of the small schools – the necessity behind their being established, (b) the composition of the children enrolled in the SSKs, (c) the system and functioning of the SSKs, and (d) the lessons – both positive and problematic – that these schools offer. We will be using both quantitative data procured from the concerned government departments, empirical studies done by the Pratichi Trust, with which the authors are associated, and our field-level qualitative observations.

Why SSK and for whom?

“Due to various reasons a *considerable number* of children across West Bengal are not able to access the opportunities of institutional education delivered through the primary schools, whereas, like other children acquiring education by them [the underprivileged children] is urgent; at the same time it is their birth right.” Thus felt the Department of Panchayat and Rural Development, which was spelt out in a memo of the Principal Secretary of the department.¹ Though this letter did not give any estimate of number of children, “not able to access the opportunities of institutional education”, it was clear that that there were reasons for concern as regards providing opportunities for all children to access education, a commitment that was made in the election manifesto of 1977 of the “Left Front” that came to power in the same year and has since been ruling the state. It was the recognition that there was a gap between the commitment and its implementation that made the government find ways and means for achieving the declared goal. At the same time, there were public demand and initiative for expanding educational opportunities, and “in order to facilitate these deprived children the opportunities of education a number of proposals for setting up through peoples’

¹ No. 3116(17)PN/O/Cell 1/O4 dated 4.8.1997; translation from Bangla by us; emphasis added.

initiated non-institutional and different kinds of education centres were received by the government...The proposals were found to be very timely” and “keeping in mind the financial and other resources of the government it was decided to extend some assistance in order to encourage these centres established through peoples’ initiative in different districts of West Bengal...After analysing the proposals and other related data it was decided to provide necessary assistance to 1000 such centres.”²

Precisely, the government decided to find some other ways than just depending upon the Department of school Education to meet the challenge of universal primary education and devolved the responsibility upon the Department of Panchayat and Rural Development that took it up in a rather fast pace. It established a separate office, the Paschimbanga Rajya Sishu Siksha Mission to run a programme called Sishu Siksha Karmasuchi. The programme was to set up and run these supplementary centres, named Sishu Siksha Kendra(SSK)s in the disadvantaged areas mainly in rural hamlets but also in some urban pockets³. The response of the people to the centres set up in the initial phase encouraged the government to extend this programme; by 2001 the government established 11,000 SSKs and by 2007 the number was raised to 16,005, which cater to 14,94, 150 children⁴ – roughly 15 percent of the total children enrolled at the primary level.

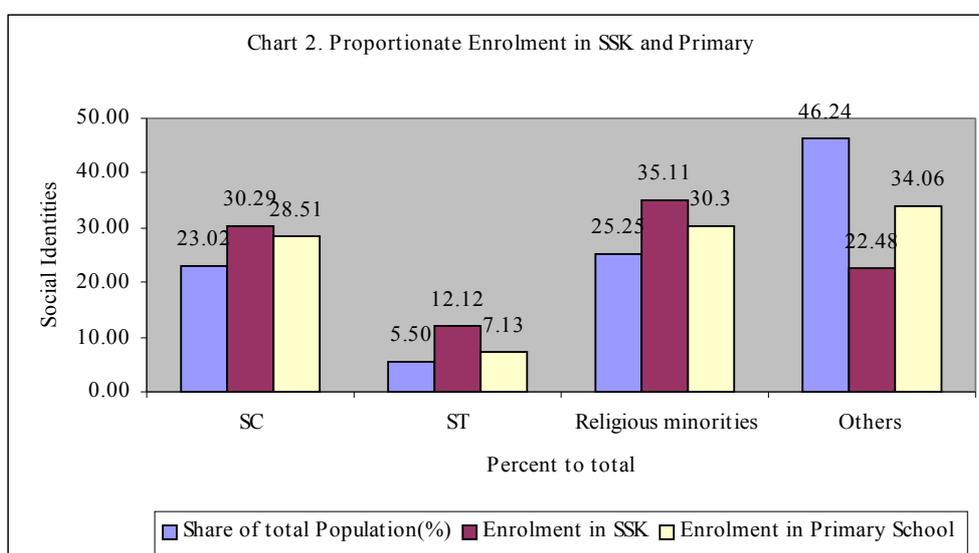
The official statement justifying the launching of the programme was vaguely generalised: it did not mention clearly the composition of the underprivileged. Who did not have the access to primary education? Was it applicable to the whole of the society? Was there a uniform need of setting up such centres? The answer to these questions directly relate to the divisions of West Bengal society, where the large majority of the illiterates come from the traditionally underprivileged background, namely the SC, ST and Muslims, who again form the bulk of the lower economic stratum. While the average literacy rate of West Bengal was 68 percent (according to the 2001 Census) figures for the SC, ST and Muslims, were 59 percent, 43 percent and 57 percent respectively. This clearly pointed out towards the wide gap of educational opportunities for these disadvantaged sections. The SSKs actually filled up this gap to certain extent. This is evident from the enrolment pattern in the SSKs vis a vis the primary schools (Chart 1 and 1A).

² *ibid*

³ The urban SSKs are run mainly by civic bodies, for example, the Kolkata Municipal Corporation.

⁴ *District-wise no. of SSK/Sahayika & Std.-wise Learners as per DISE 2007 Data* provided by the Paschimbanga Rajya Sishu Siksha Mission.

While the SC, ST and Religious Minorities (mainly Muslims) constituted 78 percent of the total enrolment in the SSK, the corresponding figure for the primary schools was 66 percent. In both the institutions the respective enrolment figures of the SC, ST and Religious Minorities (RM) as against their share to total population (23 percent SC, 5.5 percent ST and 25 percent RM) was higher; but the shares of the ‘other’ category to total enrolment in both cases were lower (22 percent in case of SSK and 34 percent in case of Primary school) than the corresponding figure to total population (46 percent). Here again, the share of the ‘others’ in the enrolment of the SSKs was much lower compared to the figure for the primary schools (Chart 2).



The indications are clear: (a) a sizeable portion of the ‘other’ category children were enrolled in institutions other than SSK and primary – means private (since the SSK and primary school constituted the government system of primary education); and (b) the proportion of ‘other’ children enrolled in SSK (22 percent) was much less than the corresponding primary school figure (34 percent). In other words the SSKs are the schools for the underprivileged, who have so far been denied of the opportunity of education.

The district level enrolment figures bring out clearly that while particular social groups faced disadvantages in terms of educational access the ‘other’ groups enjoyed relative advantage in this regard. For example, the STs form 15 percent of the total population of West Medinipur, but they share only 2 percent of the total primary school enrolment. On

the other hand they form 28 percent of the total enrolment in the SSKs. Similar is the case of the SCs in Bankura, Bardhaman and Hugli (Table 1).

Table 1. Proportionate Enrolment of the Different Social Categories in Primary and SSK

	% SC to total Population	% SC in SSK	% SC in Primary	% ST to total Population	% ST in SSK	% ST in primary	% RM to total Population	% RM in SSK	% RM in Primary	% Others to total population	% others in SSK	% others in Primary
Bankura	31.24	49.36	39.57	10.36	21.38	11.52	7.51	10.41	9.25	50.89	18.85	39.66
Bardhaman	26.98	46.08	38.36	6.41	18.9	8.8	19.78	22.12	23.51	46.82	12.9	29.33
Birbhum	29.51	30.78	33.9	6.74	18.26	8.61	35.08	41.05	38.82	28.67	9.91	18.67
Dakshin Dinajpur	28.78	32.41	34.66	16.12	25.85	19.54	24.02	26.27	23.65	31.08	15.47	22.15
Howrah	15.42	28.81	19.1	0.45	0.43	0.25	24.44	46.59	34.5	59.70	24.17	46.15
Hugli	23.58	57.21	33.53	4.21	8.29	6.06	15.14	17.67	17.62	57.07	16.83	42.79
Jalpaiguri	36.71	44.28	43.84	18.87	28.82	23.78	10.85	12.98	12.77	33.57	13.92	19.61
Koch Bihar	50.11	50.04	51.71	0.57	0.56	0.8	24.24	33.93	25.07	25.07	15.47	22.42
Maldah	16.84	21.63	22	6.90	6.53	7.24	49.72	56.98	46.74	26.53	14.86	24.02
Medinipur West	18.20	26.97	24.24	15.20	28.32	1.56	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Murshidabad	12.00	14.3	13.11	1.29	2.4	3.39	63.67	63.66	66.94	23.04	19.64	18.39
Nadia	29.66	36.77	31.95	2.47	5.71	3.53	25.41	34.97	33.33	42.45	22.55	31.33
North 24Parganas	20.60	3.43	26.17	2.23	8.52	16.29	24.22	5.48	36.94	52.95	12.57	33.36
Puruliya	18.29	22.73	21.85	18.27	31.87	20.09	7.12	4.82	7.91	56.31	40.58	50.15
South 24Parganas	32.12	35.53	32.79	1.23	2.17	1.61	33.24	37.83	38.2	33.41	24.47	27.4
Uttar Dinajpur	27.71	24	30.24	5.11	6.35	5.7	47.36	6.85	42.32	19.82	62.8	21.74
West Bengal	23.02	30.29	28.51	5.50	12.12	7.13	25.25	35.11	30.3	46.24	22.48	34.06

*For Medinipur East district comparative data was not available during the writing of this paper.

Source: For population share, Census 2001; for Primary enrolment DISE 2007-8; for SSK Enrolment, PBRSSM 2008.

Not only these small schools have a constituency of 'small people' they also have 'small teachers' and a different - and perhaps small - functional system than the primary schools. However, the smallness of the functional system has seemingly provided strength to these schools. Also the smallness of the teachers has apparently had some positive impact on the performance of the schools. In fact, the different smallness seems to have converged with each other.

Children, Teachers and the Functioning System of the SSK

That the smallness of the schools is more in the sense of its social constituency than numeric count is evident from the enrolment pattern, where the average enrolment per

SSK was 93 (in 2007-8)⁵. In fact, the figure is higher than the average enrolment in regular primary schools in some of the states in India. Again, there is a great district-wise variation in the average enrolment per SSK – between 52 (Bankura and Puruliya) and 152 (Malda). Districts with higher rate of enrolment (Malda, Murshidabad, South 24 Pargana and North 24 Parganas) are not only thickly populated but also have a higher share of Muslim population. Indeed, it was found during our fieldwork in Murshidabad, a district with 64 percent Muslim population, that the number of existing schools to accommodate the children was far too less than the actual need, which led to an overflow of children in the primary schools (while the state average of enrolment was 150, the corresponding figure for Murshidabad was 280). Similar was the case with other districts. Although the gap of school facilities exists across the state it is particularly glaring in the areas with larger concentration of the Muslims. There is a popular perception among some section of people that the Muslims are more inclined to send their children to the Madrsas than to the regular schools. But, during our fieldwork we have seen in many places that the Muslims' inclination to send their children to regular schooling system was as high as in other communities. The higher aspiration to acquire education in one hand and the lack of opportunity on the other forced them to send their children to the over-congested primary schools. And, when the SSK programme came to the area the people welcomed it with such an enthusiasm that they even donated land, most precious asset in the context of Murshidabad and Malda⁶, for establishing the SSKs.

The point to make here is that in numerical terms the SSKs of West Bengal are not only bigger than the regular primary schools of some states but are also larger in size than many primary schools in the state. The lack of schooling opportunities for sections of children is so acute that even the launching of the SSK programme has not yet proved to be adequate to meet the demand. The enrolment figures of the tribal areas also show a large gap of educational opportunities. We have seen above that the proportionate enrolment of the STs and SCs in the SSKs was much higher in some districts. Though numerically small the establishment of the SSKs in these areas has shown how large the gap of educational opportunity was. In a word, the children enrolled in the SSKs are the most unfortunate lot of West Bengal society who did not even dream to acquire education until the SSKs were formed.

Table 2. SSKs in West Bengal Districts: Children and Teachers

⁵ PBRSSM, 2008

⁶ Vulnerability to flood causing land erosion in a large scale has created a huge scarcity of land in the districts of Malda and Murshidabad.

District	No. of SSK	No of sahayikas	Total learners (2007-08)	Average enrolment/SSK	Pupil-teacher Ratio
Bankura	446	828	23113	52	28
Bardhaman	1061	3014	90129	85	30
Birbhum	650	1503	49780	77	33
Dakshin Dinajpur	529	1454	43638	82	30
DGHC (Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council)	517	1068	19756	38	18
Hoogly	279	776	21724	78	28
Howrah	307	857	27302	89	32
Jalpaiguri	1090	3150	106029	97	34
Koch Bihar	696	1759	58892	85	33
Malda	613	2109	93016	152	44
Murshidabad	1579	5651	203213	129	36
Nadia	556	1435	51824	93	36
North 24 Parganas	957	3065	105502	110	34
Paschim Midnapore	2464	6360	173907	71	27
Purbo Midnapore	1455	3985	120275	83	30
Purulia	410	767	21346	52	28
Siliguri Mahakuma Parishad	278	813	26929	97	33
South 24 Parganas	1213	4028	140980	116	35
Uttar Dinajpur	905	2990	116795	129	39
Total	16005	45612	1494150	93	33

As the smallness of the SSK was in relation to the regular primary schools in the respective areas the smallness of the teachers is also referred to in comparison of the regular primary teachers. The smallness is evident from their designation: they are called *sahayikas*, literally meaning assistants, while the regular primary school teachers are called *sikshak/sikshika*. The difference between the *Sahiyaka* and the *sikshak* is huge: while the *sahayika* is appointed on one year contract and is paid Rs 2,000 a month as honorarium, the *sikshak/sikshika* is recruited on a permanent basis and is paid a salary of at least Rs 6,000 a month. While almost all the teachers in SSKs are female, three-fourth of the primary teachers are male. While the *sahayikas* are recruited through the recommendation of the local community, the primary teachers are recruited by the district level authorities on the basis of competitive examination. While the *sahayikas* receive a short course of training of seven days or so the primary teachers' training involve a two years' course.⁷

Nevertheless, the performances of the 'small teachers' was generally found to be quite satisfactory. The Pratchi study in 2001⁸ found that while the rate of satisfaction of the parents

⁷ There is a controversy going on between the government of West Bengal and the National Council of Teachers Education (NCTE) on the issue of the duration of the training. The NCTE objected to the West Bengal government's endorsing a one-year training programme (under the West Bengal Primary Teachers Recruitment Rule 2001) which was not in accordance with the NCTE's stricture of a two-years' course. This has caused to stop all recruitments of the primary teachers in the state for more than three years.

⁸ Rana K et al (2002) The Pratchi Education Report I, with an introduction by Amartya Sen, TLM Books in association with Pratchi Trust, Delhi.

over the primary teachers' performance was 41 percent, in case of the *sahayikas* the rate was 54 percent. The initial findings of a repeat study in 2008, however, found that in both the cases the rate of parental satisfaction has increased – 66 percent and 74 percent respectively in case of primary teachers and *sahayikas*. There are many different reasons behind this improvement, but one of the important ones is the public criticism on the functioning of the primary schools vis a vis the SSKs following the publication of the Pratchi Report.

The parental perception on teachers' performance was, of course, subjective view that was based upon their particular position. It is true that many of the parents cannot even read or write which restricts their judgements on the actual quality of teaching and learning. But, aside from teaching and learning there are many other issues that have particular bearing on the parents' formulating the ideas on the teachers and schools. One such is the direct day to day observation of the parents – on the running of the school, teachers' attendance, and her relationship with the children and so on. Evaluation based upon such observations does not need functional literacy. What it needs is a closer concern on the functioning of the schools, which are supposed to facilitate, realising their aspirations of acquiring education by their children. As a mother of a SSK child in a tribal village of Birbhum district asserted:

There was no school nearby. So, most of the children of the village could not be enrolled in the school. The establishment of the SSK in the village has provided us with the opportunity; now all the children go to school...But, there is one more point. Even though some of the children of the village ventured to attend the primary school the teachers did not pay much attention to them. We are adivasis (tribal) and the teachers were non-adivasis. Never did they come to our village. Even if some parents visited the school they were treated either indifferently or rudely...The case is now completely different. The *sahayikas* visit our houses. Whenever a child is found absent in the SSK the *sahayikas* come to enquire about the child. They are very friendly to us. We too visit the SSK regularly...The *sahayikas* consult us for every matter of the SSK. In fact, they are part of us and we are part of the SSK.

Not that all the *sahayikas* are alike. But, their closeness with the parents and the local community was found during our fieldworks to be a general phenomenon – with some exceptions. Also the level of dedication among the *sahayikas* was also found to be quite high.

What caused the *sahayikas*' devotion? Was it a self-motivated move or an imposed discipline?

Most of the mothers argue that the local root of the *sahayikas* (it is mandatory to select the *sahayikas* from the locality or the neighbouring areas) and their gender are the two most important factors guiding to their better performance. Some, particularly the primary teachers, think that the *sahayikas*, who never thought of getting a salaried employment, have found a newer identity and higher status through this job. This has freed them from the insular identity of housewives and has added colour to their lives, which resulted in boosting up their motivation. On the other hand the advocates of contractual job argue that since the *sahayika*'s job is temporary (they are contracted for one year) and the renewal of

the contract is subject to the approval of the local community it is imperative for the *sahayika* to perform to the satisfaction of the parents. According to our field level interviews and observations, during the Pratichi trust studies, while the different arguments are found to be true to different degrees they together point out towards the core issue of governance of the institutions. It is the system of functioning of the SSKs which is the main driving force behind their performances.

The system of functioning of the SSKs is precisely a system that puts emphasis on involving the local communities in the running of the institutions. There is a local level committee that plays its role in recommending the *sahayikas* to be recruited, approving their honorarium, looking after the day-to-day activities of the SSKs and so on. The committee used to have a good representation of the parents. In addition, the mothers have easy access to the SSK – they can and do visit the centres. In a word the smallness of the SSKs – not in numerical sense but in the sense of their being confined to the local communities that enhance their interest not only because their children are enrolled in the SSKs but also because of their sense of ownership on the centres. This sense of ownership is not easily found in the primary schools; in fact the system does not allow such closeness, precisely because of its bureaucratic nature. Indeed, we have come across some of the SSKs where the community ownership of the institution has largely been reduced by bureaucratic or political interference (for example the selection of the venue, teachers, etc. are being done by the authorities /local level politicians without taking into account the views of the local people). Such interferences were found to have an injurious effect on the performances of the SSKs.

The Lessons

One decade has passed since the SSK was launched in West Bengal. In this period not only the SSKs have grown in number (16 times), there have been many other additions to the programme: most of the SSKs have now their own buildings (initially they were started at private premises like cow-sheds, clubs, open fields, etc.), the honorarium of the teachers has increased to Rs 2000 a month (from Rs 800 in the beginning), the children are brought under the coverage of the Mid-day Meal programme, and so on. Initially the SSKs were to run for only 3 hours a day, now the timing has been made compatible with the primary schools. In the beginning the SSKs had to deal with many different problems including housing the schools, irregular and inadequate supply of textbooks (to be supplied by the Department of School Education, according to the arrangement), irregular payment of honorarium of the *sahayikas*, and so on (we have come across the experience

of a *sahayika* in Bardhaman district who has to bribe the secretary of the SSK to get her salary cheques signed), parts of which have been overcome.

The SSK experience in West Bengal has already established some of the very positive features of small school. Two most important contribution that these small schools have made to the discourse on primary education are, (a) the teachers, and (b) the system of functioning.

Compared with the primary teachers the *sahayikas* are under-qualified, at least in the count of academic qualification. They do not have the teachers' training degree. Notwithstanding these limitations they have justified their recruitment. Without the flexibility of local level recruitment this would not have been possible. This is one important lesson that has its applicability not only in the small schools but also elsewhere.

It is the recognition that involvement of the local community is essential to make the SSKs effective has been proved to be prophetic. This again, cannot be confined only to the small schools. The term 'community involvement' is being invoked in all sectors of development, but little effort is seen to free this from its jargonised application to make it a real tool of development. The small school experiment has shown a positive way towards this direction.

Nevertheless, there are embarrassing questions relating to the small schools. In the beginning the small schools were thought to be some sort of stopgap arrangement to provide the opportunity of education for the underprivileged. But with the progress of time and success of the SSKs this is becoming some sort of regular mode. The motive behind promoting the SSKs as 'the mode' is purely economical: the SSKs are low cost. But, there is no reason why the *sahayikas* would get less than the regular primary teachers while despatching the same duties – with a common curricula and timing. Why the 'small teachers' not be given a proper training? And, most importantly why the SSKs not be recognised as regular schools – never mind the size. Does an isolated hamlet not have the right to have a regular school? Small as they are there is every reason to recognise these schools, which are serving the 'small people' of West Bengal in a big way, as regular schools. The smallness of these schools has proved to be the strongest point in their functioning. While the big schools can learn to acquire the smallness these small schools must receive the recognition of 'schools' – not just centres.