

# Bengal's primary education myth busted

KOLKATA: Attendance registers could be misleading. Only half the students enrolled in most state primary schools attend class on any given day in spite of the lure of mid-day meals.

A recent study on quality of primary education in rural Bengal, conducted by the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta (CSSSC), has come as a major embarrassment for the state government with the assembly elections just a few months away. The findings vary widely with those of the Pratiche Education Report 2009 that the government has been tomtomming all these days.

The CSSSC report concludes that the mean attendance in Birbhum schools is only 46%, below the state average of 54%, while the Pratiche report had put it well above 70%.

CSSSC researchers studied a larger sample size — 240 schools and 4,200 Class IV students spread across six districts (Bankura, Birbhum, Cooch Behar, Murshidabad, South 24-Parganas and North 24-Parganas). All but North 24-Parganas have been covered under the District Primary Education Programme.

The research, by Jyotsna Jalan and Jharna Panda and funded by the Sir Ratan Tata Trust, reveals that despite poverty, parents in villages have to spend around Rs155 a month on private tuitions for each child to supplement school education.

Researchers also found that in many areas, attendance doesn't vary much on weekdays and on Saturday, when there is no mid-day meal (MDM). "MDMs act as a vital supplement but students do not come to schools for meals only. What is more important is monitoring by

community committees and school sub-inspectors. There aren't enough spot visits by school sub-inspectors," Jalan said. What's more, 8% of the schools sampled are run by just one teacher each and the pupil-teacher ratio in most schools is a high 55, Jalan added. The scenario is particularly grim in Murshidabad and South 24-Parganas where teachers have to handle over 70 students on average.

**Source:** *The Times of India*, November 24, 2010

### **Education in rural Bengal not adequate: Study**

In a report comprising findings of a three-year long empirical research which examined the learning outcomes among primary school children in rural West Bengal, the social scientists of Centre for Studies in Social Science, Kolkata have exploded the myth that all is well in the field of education at grassroot level under the Left rule.

So far, the political establishment used to measure their success by the yardstick of the steady growth in number of enrolment in primary school level in rural Bengal.

The report showed that there is a huge gap in learning by the students.

After conducting a detailed survey among 4,200 students of class IV from 240 primary schools in six districts in the state, which involved a well-designed achievement test in Bengali and mathematics, the researchers found that the average achievement rate was much below the state-mandated passing grade.

While the state-mandated passing grade is 34 per cent, the average score in mathematics across the six districts is 27.6 percent and that of Bengali is 21.7 per cent.

Jyotsna Jalan and her associate Jharna Panda, who conducted the research, explained that their test had been graded and the students were required to answer beginning with class I level questions and then progressively attempt the questions of class II, III and IV. "Of approximately 4,200 Class IV students that took the achievement tests, a little more than 50 percent demonstrated Class I competency in Mathematics" the report reveals.

It observes, "There is clear evidence to suggest that achievement levels tend to decline as the children move along the educational hierarchy. This is true of both the Mathematics and Bengali tests in the overall sample and in the individual districts."

The study, "Low Mean & High Variance: Quality of Primary Education in Rural West Bengal", cast doubt on another commonly-held belief that in most primary schools in rural Bengal, the attendance has improved a lot. Not depending on attendance register provided by the schools, the survey team conducted head counts after arriving there unannounced.

They found out that average attendance rate was very low, about 54 percent. Only in 10 percent schools they found an average attendance rate of 80 percent or more. In another 10 percent schools, attendance rate is less than 25 percent.

The study questioned the claim that Mid Day Meal (MDM) scheme was playing a key role in attracting the children to schools. In about 22 percent schools the survey was conducted on Saturday, the day MDM is not served.

Jalan claimed that there was insignificant drop in attendance even though no MDM was being offered on the weekend. While Amartya Sen's Pratichi Trust laid much stress on the efficacy of the MDM in improving primary education, the present study does not want to give that much credit to that factor.

Rather, as Jalan puts it, "MDM is a necessary factor, but not a sufficient one."

After detailed interaction with parents, school teachers, administrators and village committee members, the researchers concluded, "No single intervention is adequate to ensure that children come to school regularly and learn.

A comprehensive policy that engages all stakeholders in primary school education needs to be formulated.

Policies have to be such that they provide incentives to parents to make them enthusiastic about sending their wards to school regularly ...to teachers to make them more conscientious towards their students, to students to make learning more accessible and enjoyable, and to communities and administration to provide better monitoring and logistical support."

**Source:** *Business Standard*, November 24, 2010