CHAPTER IV

PROFILES OF THE SCHOOLS

Introduction

In this chapter a profile of the schools have been provided in order to situate the students within their specific schooling experiences in terms of the physical and material benefits enjoyed by them at school, their learning, their relationships with the rest of the school, that is, other students and teachers, and their overall perception about their schools. This description includes that of buildings and classrooms, administrative and organisational set-up (either government or private or semi-private) and also the teaching-learning context. The views of students about their schools have also been described in this chapter. The five schools are Holy Angel for Boys (HAFB), Holy Angel for Girls (HAFG) Gyan Bharti for Girls (GBFG), St Martin and Matasundari School. Hereafter, the schools would be referred to as HAFB, HAFG, GBFG, St Martin and Matasundari School. All the schools are private, grant-in-aid schools except Matasundari which is a government school. HAFB and Matasundari are day schools with timings from 11.00 a.m. to 4.00 p.m. HAFG, GBFG and St Martin are morning schools with school timings from 6.30 a.m to 10.30 a.m. At HAFB, HAFG and GBFG, wearing school uniforms is compulsory and teachers are strict about it. At HAFB and HAFG, school uniforms are free, provided by the private management committee, but at GBFG they are not. St Martin does not have a school uniform. Matasundari School has free uniforms for girls which are provided by the government. However, there is no uniform for boys. As a result, teachers are flexible about what students wear.

Location and neighbourhood of the selected schools

All the schools are situated in the northern part of Kolkata, one of the oldest parts of the city. The area wears an ancient, time-withered look. There are houses and buildings that belong to the early twentieth, or even, the nineteenth century, and they continue to stand even in the present day with little or no renovation. New buildings come up right next to these earlier dilapidated
versions, but they are still less in number than the older buildings. Two stations of the Kolkata Metro Railways, the Shobhabazar and the Girish Park Metro Station, located within a kilometre from each other on the Central Avenue, the main road, also mark the area.

The schools are situated within close proximity of Sonagacchi, Rambagan and Sethbagan, some of the most prominent red-light areas in Kolkata. Chitpur Road, the road for transports like buses, lorries and trams is the divider between the rear end of Sonagacchi and the school building of HAFB and HAFG. The third school, St. Martin, is located on Central Avenue, the road that runs parallel to Chitpur Road and Sonagacchi. The fourth school, Gyan Bharti for Girls, is situated on Beadon Street, another road that intersects Central Avenue and Chitpur Road at right angles with Sonagacchi situated on its right, Rambagan on its left and Sethbagan, slightly beyond. The fifth school, Matasundari School, is the only school that is not situated on a main road. It is actually housed within a private residential building, which is situated on one of the smaller by-lanes adjacent to Sonagacchi.

The neighbourhood is noisy and bustling with activity throughout the day. Central Avenue, the busiest of all roads, is flanked on both sides by tall buildings that house numerous shops, offices, banks and private residences. Multitudes of pedestrians, auto-rickshaws, cars, and also heavy vehicles like buses and lorries ply throughout the day. The Metro Railway stations contribute further to the noisy and humdrum ambience since they are the confluences to and from where students, office-goers, vendors and multitudes of other people who travel by the Metro, gather and leave. The other roads namely Chitpur Road and Beadon Street are also busy roads on which cars and heavy vehicles ply, and like the Central Avenue, are fringed with numerous rows of small shops, residences, parks and other buildings. The Minerva Theatre, one of the most famous proscenium theatres of yesteryears is located on Beadon Street and is a prominent landmark of the area today. The shops on these streets are abuzz all day with their business of buying and selling, and the environment is noisy from the crowds of buyers and sellers. There are two major traffic intersections between these roads—one between the Central Avenue and
Beadon Street, and one between Beadon Street and Chitpur Road. Both these intersections are extremely busy ones with vehicles plying by every minute, and the students have to cross them everyday while coming to school.

Since the area is the hub of constant activity throughout the day with vehicles and pedestrians alike, great noise percolates inside the schools all day, creating enough distraction for the students. St. Martin, located on Central Avenue, is almost at the centre of all the noise and confusion. GBFG, located on Beadon Street is also in a similar situation with vehicles and crowds of people constantly passing by. Chitpur Road has a tram track also, and thus, the noise of screeching wheels and loud bells of the tram-cars is an added noise for the students of HAFB and HAFG since the school building is located on this road. Among all the schools, Matasundari School is the only one that is situated in a relatively quiet neighbourhood since it is situated on a by-lane that is not connected directly to any of the main roads. The neighbourhood consists primarily of individual residences and the atmosphere is free from the noisy bustle of a main road.

Management

Except Matasundari School, a government school, the rest are private and grant-in aided schools. Their primary sections do not come directly under the government, but are managed privately by the management committees of these schools according to the directives from the government. Matasundari School is the only school that is not attached to a higher secondary school, and comes directly under government administration without a separate private body looking after its management. However, since government directives for the primary schools are the same, there is no difference among all the five schools in matters related to the provision of educational facilities, duration of the academic year, curriculum and manner of assessment. There is also considerable networking between the management committees and the teachers of all the five schools with information transmitted to and from schools regarding common problems or issues that deserve attention. For example, the researcher’s arrival was one such information that had been shared by all the schools via the head-teacher of HAFB, where the researcher commenced her
fieldwork. The extent of support and cooperation from the teachers towards the researcher also seemed to be a topic that had been discussed and decided upon.

**Students and teachers**

Children come to these schools from the adjoining areas, that is, near and around Beadon Street, Central Avenue, or Chitpur Road, besides the children of sex-workers from Sonagacchi and Rambagan. There are, for instance, students living in the area adjoining Rambagan who belong to the community of the *doms*—a community whose members are traditionally scavengers and helpers in crematoriums. Around two decades back, the number of school-going children from this community used to be drastically low. However, with government and NGO initiatives, this number has shown a marked increase over the past years. A majority of these two groups of children belong to the lower and the lower-middle classes. There are other children coming from lower middle class families whose fathers practice are labourers, vegetable vendors, small shop owners and auto-rickshaw drivers. Their mothers are labourers, seamstresses and domestic workers. The age group of all the students range from six to ten years, but sometimes one may also find twelve or thirteen year olds among them, especially in classes III or IV, the school rules being flexible enough as far as age of the student during admission is concerned. This is owing to the fact that the state government, in order to provide an impetus to primary education, ensures that a child should not be admitted to school according to age, but according to the level of learning of the child during the time of admission. This ensures that a child is not deprived of education only because s/he is over the average age of students in a particular class. Most of these students are first or sometimes second generation learners, with semi-literate or non-literate parents and they lack a home environment that provides support to the schooling process. However, since the parents themselves cannot provide the children with the necessary support for school work, almost all these children have private tutors or avail of tuition facilities at various coaching centres around the locality.
Along with individual academic degrees and professional experience ranging from five to thirty years, teachers in all the schools are holders of a B.Ed degree, which is an essential requirement for a teacher in a primary or high school. The head teachers in all the schools have undergone teacher-training course, the training apparently being the differential factor between a head teacher and the other teachers. In all the schools the head-teacher is also a full time teacher. In fact, the teaching and non-teaching responsibilities are shared between the head-teacher and her/his colleagues. There are no separate teachers for specialised subjects like singing or dancing; the same teachers who teach other subjects teach them.

Non-teaching staff

All the schools have one sweeper each, barring Matasundari School where the teachers manage all the work by asking the students to do chores like filling up the vessel of drinking water, sweeping the floors, etc. The toilets are not cleaned at all in this school. Both HAFB and HAFG have one non-teaching staff each in addition to the sweeper who acts as the gatekeeper, rings the school bell at the end of the periods, runs errands for the teachers e.g. getting snacks and tea for them during interval, and also assists in administrative jobs like maintaining files in the office. At GBFG, it is the sweeper who is in charge of the same tasks. At St. Martin, the sweeper performs only the job of sweeping the floors cleaning the toilets; he does not undertake office-related chores—those are performed by the teachers themselves.

Curriculum

All schools follow the same curriculum as outlined by the West Bengal Board of Primary Education (hereafter, WBBPE) for primary schools. The subjects for class I are Bengali, Mathematics and ‘Environment’ (poribesh in Bengali)—a subject related to the surrounding environment of the child. English is added to this list from class II onwards in all schools. In classes III and IV, a subject comprising of history and geography combined together is taught instead of environment. In class IV, the highest class of the primary section, science is introduced. The medium of instruction in all the schools is Bengali, and the textbooks are all published in the same language.
Co-curricular activities

In addition to the prescribed curriculum, there are other additional activities for the students in four of the schools that aim at teaching students additional skills. Matasundari School is one exception where no additional subjects are taught. In the other schools, these additional activities are part of the school timetables, which are graded in certain schools and non-graded in others. For example, in class I, HAFB, there is a separate period for story-telling in which either the teacher or one of the students tell stories to the rest of the class—often there are several stories following one after the other, told by various students. Though most of the students narrate stories that they have heard from the teacher earlier, or have read in their textbooks, no child is discouraged from telling a story, even if the manner of narration is fragmented or the content is repetitive. The objective behind this ‘lesson’, as described to the researcher by the teacher is the gradual improvement of the faculty of imagination of the children, which would, in turn, lead to an improvement in their creativity. Art or ‘drawing’ as it is known in student parlance is another subject taught in all classes though students are not graded for their art assignments. Yet both the teachers as well as the students take the art lessons very seriously, the teachers coaxing, motivating or admonishing children upon their drawing ability or the lack of it, and the students enthusiastically participating in art lessons. There is another period kept aside in all classes of HAFB. This is for light, free hand exercises taught to the students by the teachers. The class is held indoors with the teacher shouting instructions and all the students performing the exercises according to these instructions. These activities are also not graded and so do not form an integral part of the school timetable.

In HAFG, the co-curricular activities are graded, that is, there are examinations held of subjects that are taught to students in addition to the main school curriculum. Such subjects include art, music and dance, SUPW or handiwork/‘crafts’ and also subjects like general knowledge, with separate periods kept aside for each of these subjects. St. Martin and GBFG have only SUPW or crafts as an additional subject and it is graded in both the schools.
Playing games is not part of the curriculum. Playtime in four out of the five schools is during recess or interval; no school has fixed timings or periods when students are taken outdoors to play. At Matasundari School, however, students do not play at all since they go home during recess. In HAFB students sometimes play cricket and football during recess but that happens only during special occasions like inter-class sports matches. Otherwise during recess children in all schools play in the corridors, sometimes hide-n-seek or mostly ‘catch-catch’.

Assessment and evaluation of students

All schools follow a more or less similar pattern of evaluation and assessment of students according to the guidelines laid down by the WBBPE. However, the four privately managed schools sometimes have their own rules that are not strictly in accordance with the rules of assessment in the state. For instance, students in class I do not have to take examinations. But students in class II have to appear for an external evaluation for English and Mathematics, depending upon the results of which a student is promoted to class III. In these schools a quarterly system of evaluation, comprising of both written and oral tests, exists for all subjects in classes III an IV. Also, despite the official no-detention policy followed in West Bengal with regard to primary education, children are sometimes detained and made to repeat classes if their performances are considered to be considerably below average. While the majority of children are promoted in their final examinations to the next class, the matter of promoting a child is solely the discretion of the teachers. Parents and guardians are informed about their ward’s performance and teachers have meetings with them to discuss the performance of their children, but they do not have a say in the matter of detention.

School infrastructure

School building, playground and boundary walls

HAFB and HAFG are housed within the same school building, a sprawling three-storeyed building. There is a boundary wall and a large main gate that opens on Chitpur Road. The boundary wall surrounds the school only on two sides. The other two sides open on by-lanes and on one of these by-lanes
there is a much smaller side-gate, used usually by the non-teaching staff, parents and children when they arrive late. The school building is old yet sturdy with modern day renovations replacing the old architecture wherever necessary. There are several rooms in each storey, used for various teaching and administrative purposes. The ground floor has separate staff rooms for teaching staff of the primary, the secondary/higher secondary sections, and separate rooms for the head-teachers of the primary sections and the principals of the secondary/higher secondary sections. Besides, there is also a room on the ground floor that is used for storing rice that is distributed to students under the government’s mid-day meal scheme. The first and the second floors also have spare rooms apart from classrooms that are used for co-curricular activities e.g. singing and dance classes for girls, or as laboratories. There is also a large playground within their school compound, which is used for hosting of events like Annual sports Day or inter-class sports competitions. Besides, the ground is also used for school functions like celebration of Teachers’ Day, Saraswati Puja, prize-distribution ceremonies, etc.

The building of St. Martin is a single-storey building and has a compound. Higher buildings surround the school on three sides, and the front gate of the school opens on Central Avenue. There is only one more room other than the classrooms, which is used by the teachers as the staff-room. There is no separate room for the head-teacher, who shares the staff-room with his other colleagues. There is no playground. There is a space enclosed within the compound, which is small and narrow and does not represent a playground in any way. However, the children, undeterred by the limited boundaries of the space available to them, use it as a makeshift playground during recess for playing games. Sports day ceremonies and prize distribution cannot take place within this small space. Functions like Saraswati Puja are held indoors.

The school building of GBFG is two-storeyed but small and compact in size, and there is no boundary wall. There is a narrow collapsible gate that is the only entrance to the school. Between this gate and the school building there is a small stretch of space that is used as an illegal parking lot and is almost always jammed with cars and scooters. Everyday while entering or leaving the
school the children have to twist and turn through this maze of vehicles. The ground floor has two staff rooms, each belonging to the teachers of the primary and the secondary sections respectively. The first floor consists of classrooms for the secondary section. On the ground floor behind the classrooms there is a very small yard that is an open cemented area with patches of grass on either side, and this is where the children play during recess. As in St. Martin, all functions of the school are held indoors and no sports events are held.

Matasundari School does not have a building of its own but is housed in two ground floor rooms of a private residence, a house with a boundary wall that is ancient and continues to look dilapidated despite sporadic renovations by the owner. There is no separate staff room. There is a small courtyard within the compound where children play during recess. Mostly, however, the teachers send them home during recess since the owners of the house object to the noise created by the children.

Classrooms

HAFB has six classrooms in all, one each for classes I and II and two rooms each for classes III and IV which have two separate sections. All these classrooms are situated in a single row on one side of the first floor corridor. In the mornings these same set of classrooms are used by HAFG. There is one classroom that is used for holding of singing and dance lessons for girls of classes III and IV. The classrooms are large and commodious and there are sufficient numbers of high benches and desks for all the students and the desk and chair for the teacher. There is enough room in the class for the teacher to move around all the students’ desks. There are fans and tube lights in every classroom, though during the day there is hardly any use for the tube lights—there are large windows with wooden shutters through which sufficient amount of daylight is received and the classrooms are well lit. Each classroom has two doors, one facing the teacher’s desk and one at the back of the classroom, and the positioning of the doors and the windows ensure cross ventilation inside the rooms. There is a blackboard fixed to the wall behind the teacher’s desk, which is the only teaching-learning aid.
There are four classrooms, one for each class (classes I-IV) in St. Martin. The classrooms are small and dark, but since the number of students is less there is no crowding in the classrooms despite their small sizes. High benches and desks are provided for the students and a desk and a chair for the teacher. The classrooms have a tube light and a fan each. However, at the time of the researcher's visit the fans in classes II and IV were out of order and throughout her stay, they were not fixed. There is no cross-ventilation since windows are not positioned accordingly. The classrooms of classes II and IV have windows that open in the staff room and the corridor respectively, so no daylight comes through these windows and the classrooms remain dark during the day if the lights are not switched on. One day the children of classes II and IV had to be given a holiday because there was no electricity. Classes I and III, however, have high open skylights that serve as windows allowing sufficient daylight to come in, so these classes are properly lit during the day without necessitating the use of a light. There are blackboards in every class but they are small and one or two are considerably old and damaged. No other teaching-aid is present in the classrooms.

The four classrooms of classes I-IV in GBFG are located on the ground floor with no separate sections for any class. The classrooms are small and are crammed with as many benches and desks they can hold. The teachers sometimes have problems accommodating all children within the classroom, especially on occasional days of full or near full attendance. Except for class I where the classroom is slightly bigger, there is hardly any room in the other classrooms for the students to move around freely. In class IV, the problem is compounded by the presence of a large old steel almirah in the room, which is used for storing old administrative documents, sports kits, students' handiwork etc. Teachers in classes II, III and IV seldom move around the class to help students with their assignments and usually stand or sit on their chairs while teaching. Students get their assignments corrected by squirming and wriggling around desks and benches before they finally reach the teacher's desk. The classrooms have small windows which open toward cemented high walls or dusty roads. The classroom of class IV does not have a window while the only window in class II cannot be opened because there is not enough space between
the window and the wall of the adjacent building. Therefore, tube lights have to be switched on during the day while the lessons continue.

In Matasundari School, there are two classrooms of which one is shared by classes I and II and the other by classes III and IV. Ten children belonging to the infant (kindergarten) section who have the same school timings as the other students also share the classroom of classes I and II. The size of the classrooms is extremely small, and there is no space for students or teachers to move beyond their seats. In the classroom shared by the infant section and classes I and II, students cannot put their bags on their benches or their desks or even on the ground. They are forced to keep them on their laps. Textbooks, exercise books, pencils and pens cover every available inch of space on the desks. The benches are already crowded with nine students sharing a bench meant for six, and they constantly jostle and push each other for more space. The teachers have to teach while sitting or standing constantly on one place. Students too stand up and hand their assignment to the teacher from their seating place. In case a student is sitting too far away from the teacher, s/he forwards the assignment through her/his classmates. The teacher also returns it in a similar manner after correcting it. Each class has a window but both windows are blocked on the other side by high cement walls and are seldom opened, due to which there is very light or fresh air inside the classrooms. Low-watt electric bulbs dimly light the classrooms during lessons. The blackboard in each class is the only teaching-aid used by teachers while teaching.

**Toilet/ drinking water and other facilities in the schools**

Though government documents (Education Report, West Bengal 2001-02: 27) speak of several sports-related incentives being provided to students (which includes provision of sports facilities and sports kits to all schools) with considerable finances being allocated for the purpose, such facilities are an exception than the rule in the selected schools. For instance, at HAFB, students are provided with sports kits that consist of sporting gear for football and cricket. HAFG is the only school to provide its students with library facilities, with books being issued to students at regular intervals from the school library. None of these additional facilities are provided to the children at St. Martin.
GBFG provides the students with sports goods that consist of football for boys and skipping ropes for girls, which, however, are seldom used by the students due to lack of space. Matasundari School does not have sports or library facilities for students but certain teaching aids were observed in the classrooms, e.g. a thermometer to demonstrate the manner in which temperature is recorded, and small balls to be used for demonstrating the nature of force and a globe for teaching of geography. These, however, were stacked on high shelves under a pile of other objects like old books and assignments of students and were never used by the teachers since they were more concerned about the likely damage of the objects being broken by the students.

All schools have toilet and drinking water facilities with one toilet each for the teachers and the students, though the toilets are mostly poorly maintained. While the other schools have taps for drinking water, at Matasundari School an earthen pot is filled from the house of the owner and kept between the two classrooms for students and teachers to drink from.

None of the five schools have canteens within the school premises but there are several sweetshops and eateries in the neighbourhood who do a roaring business during recess hours by selling beverages (hot and cold, e.g. tea, coffee and even sherbet in disposable cups) food and snacks (chowmein, cutlets and pakoras, chaat, bhelpuri, kachoris, puri-subzee) to students and teachers. On an average a student spends two-three rupees on food and snacks everyday. Some students bring their own lunch from home, and guardians of a few others who have homes nearby come during recess with food from home. However, even then children buy snacks for themselves during recess. This happens in all schools except Matasundari School where all the students go home during recess.

No school provides transport facilities to students since most of the students live nearby and walk to and back from school. Mostly, guardians accompany the children but some of them, especially children in classes III and IV, come and leave with friends. In some cases the guardian of a student also takes the responsibility for a group of three or four children from the same
neighbourhood. In all schools, except Matasundari School and St. Martin, if a guardian is late the student is made to sit in the teachers' room till her/his arrival, and even if the teachers themselves leave, the gatekeeper is told to keep a watch on the child until the guardian arrives. In Matasundari School and St. Martin, there is no gatekeeper, and therefore, the teachers have to wait till every child has left with her/his guardian or friends. However, mishaps do happen sometimes, as was the case at GBFG when one day a girl had not waited for her guardian to arrive but had left with another friend. The teachers were unaware of this, and when the girl's mother arrived and discovered that her child was missing, there was considerable panic. The gatekeeper of the school was sent to the locality of the girl and the problem solved only when the friend’s mother told him that the girl had reached home safely.

Welfare facilities provided by the government

Free textbooks and free uniforms for girls are provided in all the schools as per government norms for primary schools. Books are distributed to the children at the beginning of a new academic year when schools reopen after the summer vacation. The provision of mid-day meal also exists. Cooked mid-day meals are not provided, but 3 kilograms of rice are distributed to every student three times a month. The rice arrives in bulk and is stored in HAFB from where it is distributed to all children from the neighbourhood schools who come here to collect their share. Other facilities like health inspection or library facilities or sports kits are not provided by the government, but individual schools have some of these facilities depending upon whether the management committee provides them or not.

School environment

School environment, with reference to this specific study, consists of those set of situations or circumstances that occur regularly at a fixed time and place as part of the schooling process, which define and mould the day-to-day schooling experiences of students and teachers alike. These comprise of the assembly, classroom teaching-learning process and playtime.
Assembly

School assembly in all the schools is the first activity that officially marks the beginning of a school day. The time for holding the assembly is the same in all the schools, that is fifteen to twenty minutes after the official time for starting of the school, when most of the students and teachers are expected to arrive. The assembly comprises of a prayer service, but the manner in which the prayer service takes place is different in all the schools. For instance, students loudly recite their prayers in HAFB, GBFG and St. Martin, while they sing prayer songs at HAFG and Matasundari School. The assembly is held outdoors in HAFB and HAFG, along the corridors in St. Martin, in the classrooms in GBFG and Matasundari School. What are same for all the schools are the congregational nature of the assembly, the offering of prayers, and the necessary presence of everyone during the assembly.

Teaching learning process

In HAFB, HAFG and GBFG, the daily timetable is drawn by the teachers at the beginning of a new academic year and is followed till the starting of terminal examinations at the end of the year. This timetable consists of the core subjects, namely, Bengali, Mathematics and English every day. In classes III and IV, science, history and geography are also taught everyday. Lessons of other co-curricular activities (crafts, singing or dancing) usually take place in one period per week. The length of each period is either thirty-five or forty minutes per period, differing from school to school. Sometimes for some of the core subjects like mathematics or Bengali or science there are two continuous periods on the same day, which means that some subjects are taught for longer time than the others. In St. Martin and Matasundari School, though a written timetable exists, it is not rigorously followed. In St. Martin, teachers maintain their own time schedule of teaching though there is no bell or any device marking the divisions between periods. The lessons taught sometimes do not match with the written school timetable with occasional instances of teachers not teaching a particular subject since there is not enough attendance. In Matasundari School the written timetable is also not followed in term of arrangement of lesson and time of those lessons. The subjects taught, however,
are the same core subjects as in other schools, Bengali, mathematics, science, history, geography and English.

The basic teaching-learning process is the same for all the schools with teachers emphasising two things—teaching and subsequently testing the learning of students through classroom assignments. While teaching, the teacher usually reads a line or a word aloud, which the whole class repeats after her/him in unison. The teacher explains the meaning of the sentence or the word, asking the students whether they have understood the meaning or not. Sometimes, s/he asks the students to repeat what has been explained and then the teacher continues with the explanation. In case of mathematical tables, addition and subtraction the process is almost the same, with the teacher loudly reading a multiplication table or loudly explaining a step of addition, which the students are expected to repeat. Considerable emphasis is laid on memorising, be it of texts or multiplication tables. The manner of explanation depends to a large extent on the individual teacher. While some teachers pay considerable attention towards making all the students understand their lesson, others are not too concerned to find out if all students have understood the lesson or to spend extra time with those who have not. Very few students ask questions or clarify their doubts about things that they cannot understand. If they fail to understand the lesson or even a part of it, they do not say anything and let the teacher continue with the teaching. The teaching-learning process is wholly unidirectional with the teacher assuming an active role and students listening without interrupting the teacher in the middle of the lessons by asking questions.

While testing the extent of learning achievement of students, teachers resort to asking verbal and non-verbal (written) questions. Usually, teachers ask questions on a subject that has already been taught in the previous class. When the teacher asks a question, students are required to answer it verbally. Sometimes, students are also called to the blackboard individually to solve problems. The blackboard is the most important and the only teaching aid that is used while teaching, with the teacher writing questions and their answers, drawing figures and diagrams on it to explain the lessons to the students. After
continuing with this for a while, the teacher provides the class with an assignment which students are required to solve individually in their exercise books and the teachers correct their assignments. Both the written assignments and the verbal question answer sessions are expected to be handled by students using their memory but in some instances they are allowed to consult their textbooks. In GBFG, for instance, once or twice a teacher would allow the students to write down a poem or a lesson as an assignment, not from memory but by looking at the textbook.

In case a student fails to do the assignment or get the assignment corrected by the teacher, the teacher does not go out of her way to help the child with the assignment. Mostly, it is admonitions, threats such as ‘I will see what you write in your exams’ and sometimes physical punishment like beating or slapping for students who fail to do their assignments correctly or even do them at all. Except for one or two teachers, most of them do not take the initiative to actually address the learning problems of individual students and help them with it. However, for the students who are successful in doing their assignments correctly, teachers reward them by praising them before the rest of the class and writing ‘good’ or ‘very good’ in their exercise books. These students are encouraged to maintain their academic performance and are singled out from the rest of the class with special favours being granted to them. This is by making them class monitors, using their textbooks in class while teaching, letting them wipe the blackboard, carry the roll-call register to and from the class.

Learning achievements of students in schools

The learning achievement of students is different in different schools. In Matasundari School, for example, the majority of students were able to answer questions and do written assignments to the satisfaction of the teachers. St. Martin represents the other end of the spectrum with most of the children being unable to even write basic Bengali alphabets or do additions even in class IV. HAFB, HAFG and GBFG fall somewhere in between with the performance of students varying from class to class. However, a general trend has been observed in all the schools, that there is a gradual decrease in the learning
competencies of students from classes I-IV; while in classes I and II majority of
the students meet the set standards of performance in terms of assignments, the
number of such students decrease in classes III and IV. More students could do
written assignments and answer verbal questions of the teacher correctly in
classes I and II than in III or IV. The reason for this may be the addition of new
subjects (English, history, geography, science) and increasing complexity in the
pedagogical content of the old ones (Bengali, mathematics) that the students
find difficult to cope with. Also, despite such increase in the workload of
students in classes III and IV, there are no additional inputs from the teachers to
the students within the inflexible context of formal schooling. Teachers do not
take extra time out of the fixed timetables to help students with the new subjects
they have to cope with. No additional classes are held in any of the schools for
students if they struggle with their academic performance.

Student attendance and reasons for absenteeism

Absenteeism is a common factor in all the schools, though the rate of
absenteeism differs from school to school. Children come to school with their
parents or a guardian or with friends or elder siblings if they too study in the
same school. It has been observed, though, that in all the schools, absenteeism
is more common in the classes of II, III and IV, and is more prevalent among
boys than girls. Students of class I in all schools have been observed to be
regular in attending school. A child generally does not attend school only when
s/he is not well or there is no one to accompany the child to school or in case of
unfavourable weather, like rainy days. In some instances, especially for
‘morning’ schools, getting up late in the morning is another reason that
sometimes results in absence. However, in case of children in classes II, III and
IV, absence is a common phenomenon and more common among boys than
girls. Besides there are students who come late almost every day. No
explanations are offered by students (unless interrogated by the teachers) for
their absence or for being late to school. Among boys, the general reasons for
such absence or delay range from playing truant on the way to school to
performing household chores or going to one’s native village or even, fear of
examinations. Sometimes there are other reasons as well. In class II of HAFB
there was a student who, despite being regular, was late for classes every day by
ten-fifteen minutes. His father accompanied him to school everyday, so the possibility of his playing truant on the way to school did not exist. Later on, a conversation between the teacher and the child’s father revealed that his father, who went to work at the same time and on the way dropped his son to school, took sometime to get ready and then help the child get ready for school. As a result, the child always came late to school.

Playing truant on the way to school without the knowledge of the parents or the teachers is one of the most common reasons for absenteeism. In HAFB, instances of students leaving home for school and going elsewhere have been observed. In St. Martin, too, students, especially those who were sex-workers’ children narrated similar incidents of playing truant from school to the researcher. In fact, this is the most common reason for being absent among the students of this school, which, as mentioned above, has a high rate of absenteeism. In most cases, teachers and guardians are unaware of such truancy, but sometimes teachers do catch these latecomers or absentees. In HAFB a teacher once saw two boys from class III who were wandering around the neighbourhood park during school hours. When questioned by the teacher in class next day, the students initially denied the whole fact, and then later blamed each other for the incident. In GBFG, another student of class III, a sex-worker’s child, was observed who came to school on time only if accompanied by his mother (which was only sometimes), otherwise, he was invariably late to class. On the very first day of the researcher’s observation in class, the teacher asked him the reason for his being late, and he said, pointing to a huge vermilion mark on his forehead that there was a pooja at his home. However, he was late for class the next day as well, and the process continued, with him always offering some excuse or other. A talk between the child’s mother and the teacher was also of no avail. Though the mother said she had been unaware of the whole thing so long and promised to drop the child to school herself, she was not seen for days together after the meeting with the teacher. When the teacher asked the child he said that his mother was ill.
Another reason for absenteeism is fear of examinations. In GBFG, a class III student who had previously failed in some of his examinations took to staying away from school whenever examinations were held. During the researcher's stay in class III one day the teacher announced the beginning of examinations from next Monday onwards. Hearing this, the student told the researcher that he would absent himself from school on Monday. When asked why, he said that he would be forced to take the examination if he was there. His friend sitting next to him laughed and commented that he was refusing to take the examinations because he would surely fail if he did. The student did not disagree with what the friend said.

Performing household chores is another reason for children to get late for school. This assumes special importance with respect to girl students, since this is their most common reason for coming late or being absent from school. However, from children from poor homes, poverty neutralises the gender socialisation of children. For instance, in St. Martin, a class II student remained absent (or sometimes, came late to school) due to performance of household chores. He was the elder sibling and his sister, three years old, was too young to do anything. It was his responsibility after getting up early in the morning to first cook food for his mother, who was a sex worker and slept during the day, his sister and himself, and then get ready for school. Since school timings are from 6.30 a.m., he was required to get up at 4.00 in the morning for coming to school in time after completing his household duties, which he failed to do and mostly remained absent.

Sometimes, it has also been noted that girls remain absent, and subsequently drop out from school due to prospective matrimony. This is true especially for daughters of sex-workers. Getting their daughters married off early, so that they do not stay in the red-light areas and join the same profession, is one of the priorities of the mothers, especially when girls are slightly 'old' as in classes III and IV. One such incident has been recorded in class IV of GBFG. A girl had been absent from class, and when the teacher questioned her friends about her, no one volunteered to reply. Later, however, when the teacher had left the class, there was an animated discussion among all the girl
students, which revealed that this particular student was to get married a few days later. Some of the girls seemed to be excited about the news, but no one sounded surprised; they seemed to accept it as a normal occurrence.

Another reason for absenteeism, mostly stated by teachers, is that the parents often take the children for long visits to their native villages (desh) that results in the child’s falling behind the rest of the class. Sometimes this even causes the child’s name to be struck off the rolls, if the stay is for more than a month in the middle of the academic year.

On the whole, teachers perceived parental insensitivity to the importance of schooling as the most important reason for problems in the child’s schooling. In Matasundari School, for instance, a teacher remarked about a student who was a frequent absentee i.e. absent once every two or three days:

This child used to be quite good in studies earlier, and was very regular to school as well. But his family-members are spoiling matters for him. They prefer not to send him to school but want him to stay at home and run errands for them, and his studies are suffering. Earlier, he used to study well and was regular in his classroom and home assignments, but these days he is hardly attentive in class, does not do his homework often.

In a way, all the factors related to school absenteeism could, at some point or other, be connected to the home environment. The students who stay back at home, either to ‘have fun’ with their friends or to look after household duties, do so because they lack any input from their home environment that would induce them to attend school regularly. The reason for lack of input, however, does not seem to stem from not lack of interest on the part of the parents or the mothers (for sex-workers’ children), since all the children take private tuition lessons or go to coaching classes in the neighbourhood even if the parents/mothers are poor and cannot give time to their children.

It was observed, however, that parents/mothers of the child do not know what the child does. Even if they do, they are usually too busy working for their livelihood to constantly keep a watch on the child’s schooling process. The sex-workers, for instance, despite wanting to spend more time with their children,
cannot do so because they are busy during the greater part of the night and some part of the day as well, and the children are left to themselves. Children who do not stay with their mothers and have guardians looking after them also face the same situation at times when the guardian turns out to be less responsible than what the mothers expect them to be, and do not maintain a watch over the child's studies and schooling as they should. Under such circumstances, it is often possible for a sex-worker's child to do whatever s/he wants to do and stay back at home whenever s/he does not want to go to school.

**Perceptions of students about their schools**

From the daily observation and informal interviews conducted in the schools, it was evident that external circumstances/situations or apparent lack of parental pressure are not the only reasons that determine a student's reasons for coming to school. The way a student perceives her/his school determines the student's attendance in school and also the educational performance of the student—this factor could have either a positive or a negative influence upon the schooling experiences of the child. Feelings of pride and attachment to one's school, intimacy with friends and respect for teachers all could have a positive impact on the schooling process with the child being keen and motivated to attend school. On the other hand; feelings of detachment, lack of motivation and disinterest would result in alienation of a child from the school. In this context, the school environment has a distinct role to play in shaping a child's perceptions towards a school. An attempt, therefore, has been made to understand the students' perceptions about their schools by asking them what they like/dislike about their schools, and why.

It was observed that students in schools with better infrastructure and facilities e.g. HAFB and HAFG liked this fact about their schools and mentioned these facilities among things they liked about their schools. Therefore, in these two schools, students talked about their playground, their school libraries, the song and dance lessons, and the school functions that several students had a chance to participate in, as the things they liked about their schools. Children in schools where the physical facilities were not too adequate e.g. GBFG, St Martin and Matasundari School had less to say about
what they liked in their schools. In Matasundari School, however, despite the
difficult classroom conditions that they studied in, students commented on the
teaching-learning environment of the school and mentioned how they liked their
school because teachers taught with care and because there were not too many
students in class. As stated by a girl in class IV:

I like this school because there are so few of us here, in my
earlier school there were so many children in one class, around
fifty. The teacher could not hear us unless a lot of us used to
shout together. I never got a chance to get my work corrected by
her. Always there would be some of us left whose work could
not be corrected and didi used to then tell us to submit our copies
so that she could check them later, but I could not do that
because I had only one copy. If I submitted it, where would I do
my homework? That is why I would never submit my copy and
my work never used to get corrected. Sir (private tutor) used to
scold me at home. Here there are so few of us and I can always
get my copy corrected by didi.

The most common factor that all children liked about their schools and
mentioned frequently was that school meant ‘friends’. Peer group constitutes an
integral part of a child’s schooling experiences, with new friends being made in
school in addition to one’s old friends. Groups of friends often act as a major
incentive to attend school. In this context, what a girl in class III of GBFG had
to say is noteworthy:

I do not like it when sometimes we come to school and they give
us a holiday because there is no water, or there is a bandh or
strike. If I come to school I want to stay for the whole day. I
have more friends here at school than at home. At home there is
no one I can play with and I have to sit inside the house all day.
I have to study all alone on my own at home, it is much better to
study in class with everyone else than at home. I do not get
bored here.

Likes and dislikes about teachers were also expressed. For instance, in
HAFB, children in classes III and IV unanimously agreed that they liked the
classes of a particular teacher who narrated stories while teaching history or
fiction-based texts. In other schools too, students had their individual and
collective favourites among teachers, whose teaching made schooling
interesting and relevant for them. Also, the personality of the teacher, whether
sterne or pleasant, decides the students’ liking for her/him.
Among things they disliked, one common response in all schools was 'examinations', a phenomenon that sometimes even made students stay away from school. Among other reasons for disliking school was lack of discipline or enforcement of rules. In St. Martin, a girl in class IV stated that she did not like the fact that in her school there was no rule that was enforced with respect to wearing school uniforms:

This school is not a good one, here people come to school even wearing chappals and the teachers do not say anything. In the other school where I used to study earlier, all of us had to wear white socks and black shoes, Here there is no such thing.

In GBFG, the one thing that students did not seem to like about their school was the fact that their classrooms were small and crowded and also that they did not have a playground. In fact, class IV boys who would be leaving this school to seek admission in other schools at the end of the year were looking forward to joining 'big' schools like HAFB because of the facilities like a playground, and regular sports events. One interesting response specifically within the context of this school was that boys would rather study in a boys' school than in a 'girls' school with girl students. Individual students mentioned that they would like to leave this school soon and join all-boys' schools from class V since this would mean that they have 'grown up' and they would not have to study with girls anymore. Not being associated with girls seem to be equated by these students with growing up and entering into the domains of the 'man's world'.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented the profiles of the selected schools. All except one school are government-aided schools. Infrastructural facilities differ from school to school, but the basic facilities of toilet and drinking water are available in all the schools. Welfare measures like mid-day meals and free textbooks are also provided to all the students. Big schools like HAFB and HAFG are 'big' not only in terms of student strength and number of teachers but also in terms of school buildings, playgrounds, facilities like sports kit and library. Matasundari school, being a government school, has more teaching-aids
than any other school but they are never used. No school provides transport or canteen facilities.

The teacher: student ratio is below 30:1, so there are sufficient number of teachers per student in every school. The students belong to lower or lower middle-class homes, including children from red-light areas, and are first or second-generation learners. Teachers teach through verbal instructions and written assignments, and students are assessed through quarterly examinations, and also detained if necessary.

Students attend schools but absenteeism is also prevalent. Reasons for absenteeism range from performing household chores, playing truant from school, visit to their native villages, and even fear of examinations. Certain gender-related factors like performance of household chores and early marriages are specific reasons for girls to remain absent from or drop out from school. Sometimes, however, especially in poor homes, performing of household chores also result in absenteeism for boys. There are several reasons why students like coming to school. One major incentive for coming to school is friends. Besides, there are other reasons differing from school to school like material facilities, student strength, and favourite teachers. For boys who attend coeducational schools, studying in an all-boys school in future is a motivational factor to continue schooling at present, so that for secondary education they can gain admission to boys' schools.

This chapter provides a profile of the schools. In the following chapters, the focus is on the schooling process, the interaction of the students with their teachers and their peer group within the context of the schooling experiences of the students.