CHAPTER 6

SPATIAL ANALYSIS OF SCHOOLS AND STAKEHOLDER’S
PERCEPTION ABOUT ELEMENTARY EDUCATION:
A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

This chapter is divided in two sections. The first part discusses the actual location of
schools across the sample panchayats and the second part discusses the perception of
the stakeholders on various facets of elementary education.

Section A
6.1. Spatial Pattern of Schools

A detailed analysis of spatial spread of schools across sample panchayats is done
by mapping all the schools, types of road connecting the schools and types of
habitation scenario. All the government run elementary schools (157 primary schools
and 35 upper primary schools) are plotted on base map. The maps show that every
block has its own characteristics in terms of location of schools. However, sharp
differences exist between forested blocks and non-forested blocks in the matter of
school location. Non-forested blocks are ahead of forested blocks in terms of road
network and number of primary schools as well as school infrastructures. Area-wise,
forested blocks are large with difficult terrains and sparsely spread habitations. In
contrast, the area of the non-forested blocks is small but population density is high.

For in-depth observation of distribution of schools, an analysis is done panchayat-
wise using 2011 census data, DISE data (2013-14) and field survey including physical
verification of all schools. The panchayat-wise distribution of primary and upper
primary schools is as follows:

A. Forested Region
   i. Basanti Panchayat

Basanti panchayat is one of the panchayats under Basanti block. The northern
boundary of Basanti panchayat is a tributary of the Matla River, with one ferry
station, which was the only way to cross the river, until recently. Now, a bridge built
recently connects the panchayat to the other side of the river. The total area of the
panchayat is 1477.33 hectare. Basanti panchayat is flanked on the south by Bharatgar
panchayat, on the east by Masjibati panchayat, and bounded on the west by Matla
River with thick mangrove forest on its banks. Basanti Highway which is the only
major road in this panchayat passes from north to south through middle of the panchayat. The other parts of the village are connected through village roads and most of them are un-metalled. The panchayat consists of ten villages with 31 habitations. Basanti block, of which this panchayat forms part of, is a minority (Muslim minority) dominated block in the state of West Bengal. The total population of this panchayat is 30592 as per 2011 census with 17 percent SC/ST population (Table 6.1).

Currently, provision of primary education in the panchayat is through 7 regular primary schools, 9 SSKs, 1 Junior Basic school (I-V), 2 government aided schools and 1 Madrasa I-VIII (recognised) schools. This apart there are four upper primary/High schools in the panchayat. These schools are situated in 17 habitations spread over 10 villages (Figure 6.1).

![Figure 6.1 BASANTI PANCHAYAT Block: Basanti](image)

Source: Block Development Office, Basanti Block and Field Survey, 2013-14

The spatial distribution of primary schools reveals that there are some habitations where more than one school is situated within one km radius while some habitations do not have any schools close by. In a Memorandum of School Education Department, Primary Branch [No.134-SE (Pry)/10M-95/200(Pt1)] it has been clarified that there will be no bar to having more than one primary school within a radius of 1km from the habitation provided it is justified in terms of accessibility and need based requirement. But in some places, two schools are situated at close proximity, without much justification. As for example the Paschim Basanti Adibasi SSK (enrolment 76) and Murokhal Teorpur SSK (enrolment 249) are situated within
a distance of half kilometre. Both the habitations are dominated by general population. These habitations are connected by a metalled road. Similarly, the distance between Makhalpara Balaram FP (enrolment 210) and Azad SSK (enrolment 119) is 0.6 kilometres, and from Azad SSK, the distance of Krisnanagar Purbapara SSK (enrolment 131) is 0.6 km. There are five such areas where two schools are located within 0.5 to 0.7 km of location. In this panchayat, about 50 percent schools are Shishu Shikha Kendras, which are characteristically run by low paid and less qualified teachers. There are two villages (Srirampur and Krishnanagar) where there are no regular schools but only Shishu Shiksha Kendras.

Location-wise, most of the upper primary schools are concentrated on the northern side of the panchayat. Three out of the four upper primary schools in the panchayat (Table 6.2) are situated on the northern side along the Basanti Highway. Another upper primary school, i.e. Basanti High School is also situated on the northern side along the river. In regard to the location of the upper primary schools, three schools are situated within 1.3 km radius, and another one is situated about 1.5 km south of these schools. There is an upper primary school in Masjidbati panchayat which is on the eastern side of Basanti, but this school is not adjacent or accessible to children of Basanti. Similarly, there is an upper primary school in Bharatpur panchayat which lies on the southern side of Basanti, but this school is not adjacent or accessible to children of Basanti. The other two sides of Basanti village are rivers. Hence, after completing primary education, children from Basanti have to go to one of these four distant upper primary schools, except the students of two schools (Rabidrabharati SSK and Ballartop Free Primary) which are close to an upper primary school outside Basanti panchayat at Bharatgar. Thus, the students of the habitations situated in the extreme northeast, southeast or southwest of the panchayat have to travel more than 4.5 kms. The upper primary schools are concentrated in two villages out of nine villages of this panchayat.

**ii. Charbidyarabad Panchayat**

This is another panchayat under Basanti Block. A portion of Basanti Highway is its north-western boundary. A tributary of River Dansa flows on the south-eastern side. In the north eastern boundary there are the two villages of Fakirtakia and Rampur of Sandeshkhali block, North 24 Parganas district. South-western boundary of Biyarabad
is Titkumar village of Amjharpa panchayat. The panchayat consists of two villages—Charbidyarabad and Kumrokhali. The areal extent of these villages is quite large with 1242.52 hectares and 1079.97 hectares, respectively. There are 20 habitations with a total population is 25056, out of which 48 percent are SC/STs. (Table 6.1).

There are 18 primary schools, of which 15 are regular primary and 3 are SSKs. There are no private schools in this panchayat. The number of upper primary/high schools is 2. These schools cater for 13 habitations.

Vast areas of this panchayat are covered by Bheries (Marshy land) where locals catch fish for a living (Figure 6.2). The condition of the roads here is not good, and becomes worse during rainy season. There are some habitations without a single primary school, and in some habituation two primary schools are located in close proximity as in the eastern portion of Charabidya village near the river, where there are no schools at all, and the western side of the village, where 3 schools are located in close proximity. These schools are Charabidya FP (Enrolment-230), Hetalkhali FP (Enrolment-180) and Petuakhali M.S.Para FP (Enrolment-197). All the three habitations are dominated by Muslim General Category population. The distance

Figure 6.2

Charbidyarabad Panchayat
Block: Basanti

Source: Block Development Office, Basanti Block and Field Survey, 2013-14
between the schools is 0.6 km and 0.7 km respectively. There are three such areas where schools are located within a radius of one kilometre. There are two upper primary schools, one each in these two villages (Table 6.2). Both schools are situated near the western boundary of the village. Hence, the students of the habitations located in the eastern side near the river have to travel more than 4 kms to attend school.

iii. Amjhara Panchayat

Amjhara panchayat of Basanti block consists of four census villages. The area of the panchayat is 2255.78 hectares and population 30237 as per 2011 census. Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes constitute 35 percent of the total population of the panchayat (Table 6.1). Amjhara canal is one of the major sources of irrigation in the panchayat. The Canning-Malancha road passes through the panchayat from north-east to north-west. The other roads are village roads, mostly brick road, broken brick road or mud road. There are 17 habitations in the panchayat. Almost all habitations in the panchayat have over 1000 population; about 40 percent habitations have population above 2000 and 12 percent habitations have population above 3000. There are 19 primary schools and 4 upper primary schools in the panchayat (Table 6.2). The primary schools are clustered in south-west, north-west and central parts of the panchayat. Clustering of few primary schools within one km radius is also found in the panchayat area (Figure 6.3). For example, schools like Amjhara Naskarpara SSK and No.1 Amjhara FP are located at 0.4 km of distance from each other. Similarly, Taldaha Dakshin Shikaripara SSK and No. 67 Taldaha Halderpara SSK are located within 0.4 km of distance from each other. Upper primary schools are clustered in the south-west and central parts of the panchayat. There are no upper primary schools found in the north-east, east, and south-eastern sides of the panchayat. Students from the habitations in these locations have to travel about 7 km to reach an upper primary school.
Source: Block Development Office, Basanti Block and Field Survey, 2013-14

Source: Block Development Office, Mathurapur II Block and Field Survey, 2013-14
iv. Kankandighi Panchayat

It is a panchayat under Mathurapur-II block. The total area of the panchayat is 1,882 hectares, and the total population is 24,921 (Table 6.1). Out of total population 29 percent are SC/STs. There are two rivers and many fisheries within the panchayat area. There are three villages with 29 habitations. One highway passes through the panchayat from east to west. Besides this, there are few other metalled roads in the eastern side of the panchayat. However, the condition of the roads on the western side of the panchayat is very bad.

There are 16 primary schools, 4 upper primary school and 7 private unaided primary schools in the panchayat. Among the primary schools, 12 schools are regular primary, 3 SSKs and 1 Junior Basic schools (Figure 6.4). These schools together serve 14 habitations. There are 4 upper primary schools which cover the entire population (Table 6.2). The distances from some of the habitations to High Schools stretches to more than 5 km. For example, the students from the habitations in the southern part of Purba Jata village near Purbajata Adibasi FP have to travel more than 6 km to reach the nearest high school.

v. Kashinagar Panchayat

This panchayat comes under Mathurapur-II block. The total area of this panchayat is 834.28 hectares and consists of two villages. There are 17 habitations with a total population of 12861. Scheduled castes constitute 23 percent of the population (Table 6.1). There is no ST population in this panchayat. There are five major clusters of habitations which are at great distance from each-other. One main road passes through the eastern side of panchayat from north to south. Another metalled road passes through the panchayat from east to west. Rest of the roads are brick or broken brick and mud roads. There are 12 primary schools in this panchayat of which 4 are SSKs. The number of upper primary school is 3. These schools are spread across 15 habitations. Two upper primary schools are located on the eastern side of the panchayat along the main road, and one upper primary school is located on the southern part of the panchayat (Table 6.2). Hence the students from the northern, north-western or western part of the panchayat have to travel 4-5 km to reach school (Figure 6.5).
vi. Kautala Panchayat

This panchayat comes under Mathurapur-II block. The total area of the panchayat is 4673.31 hectares and the total population 13590 of which about 44 percent are SCs (Table 6.1). There are two villages with 18 habitations. One highway passes along the boundary of the panchayat on the eastern side. Another metalled road passes through south central part of the panchayat.

There are 17 primary schools and 3 upper primary school/high Schools in the panchayat which serve 13 habitations (see Figure 6.6 and Table 6.2). The panchayat has 3 private unaided primary schools. The distances from some of the habitations to High Schools is more than 5 kms. For example, students from the habitations on the southern part near Garankati FP, have to travel more than 4 km to reach the nearest high school.
B. Non-forested Areas

i. Bolsiddhi-Kalinagar Panchayat

Bolsiddhi-Kalinagar panchayat comes under Diamond Harbour-I block. The panchayat consists of 6 villages with 11 habitations. A main road passes through the panchayat from north-west to south-east which was a metalled road, but has now become broken and unusable for want of maintenance. All the villages are connected to the main road by village approach roads which are brick and mud roads. The panchayat is surrounded by 9 other villages of the Diamond Harbour-I block. The area of the villages is 692 hectares and population 14550 with 23 percent SCs. Area and population-wise, this panchayt is smaller than those in forested panchayats (Table 6.1).

There are 15 schools in the panchayat of which 6 are regular primary, 3 Shishu Siksha Kendras and 6 private unaided schools. Within this small area, there are 4 upper primary/upper primary cum High Schools, spread across 8 habitations (Figure 6.7). All these above schools are located in close proximity. For example, the distance between Boria Jr B and Satmanisa FP is 0.5 km, and Bolsiddhi KM Fp, Swarnakarpura SSK and Ganhat SSK are situated within 0.6 km radius. There is one upper Primary/High school each in the four corners of the panchayat (Table 6.2). Taldanga village consists of only one habitation, and in this habitation has no primary or upper primary school.
Source: Block Development Office, Diamond Harbour I Block and Field Survey, 2013-14
ii. Harindanga Panchayat

Harindanga panchayat of Diamond Harbour-I block is situated in the northern side of Diamond Harbour Municipal area. NH-117 passes through this panchayat from north to south in the eastern side of the panchayat. The panchayat consists of four villages with 17 habitations. All the villages are connected by road to the National Highway. The total population of this panchayat is 11,559 of which 9 percent are SCs (Table 6.1). There are 10 primary schools and 4 upper primary/high schools, of which one is a Private Unaided School (Figure 6.8). The average distance between most of the primary schools is one kilometre. For example, Uttar Mohanpur FP and Mohanpur FP are situated within 0.5 km distance; Ramgobindopur and Ramgobindopur Purbapara FP within 0.3 km; Stholpota and Mongrajpur FP within 0.6 km; and Bahadurpur FP and Notunhat FP within 0.7 km. The upper primary/High schools are located in the northern and south eastern parts of the panchayat. The average distance from all the habitations to a high school, is less than 3 kms. Hence, as per the norm of distance, the High schools are appropriately located.

iii. Serpur Panchayat

Serpur panchayat comes under Magrahat-I block. There are 7 villages under this panchayat with 30 habitations and the total population is 22,937 with 9 percent SC population. This panchayat is situated at the northern most part of Magrahat-I block. All the villages have metalled approach roads connecting them to the main road. There are 18 primary schools and 3 upper primary schools. Among the primary schools, 6 are private schools and 1 is Madrasa (Table 6.1). Ramchandrapur village is the inner-most village of this panchayat. Two highways, one from north to south and another from east to west, pass through this village. Most of the private schools are concentrated in this area, including its two high schools. The distribution of the schools is made in such a manner that every habitation has ready access to primary and upper primary or high schools within the normative distance of 1 to 3 km (Figure 6.9).
iv. **Rangilabad Panchayat**

Rangilabad panchayat comes under Magrahat-I block. There are 6 villages under this panchayat with 26 habitations and the total population is 18038. Scheduled Castes population constitutes 29 percent of the total. This is a small panchayat compared to the other two panchayats, with only 645.68 hectare land area. There are 20 primary schools of which 6 schools are private unaided schools (Table 6.1). The panchayat has 3 upper primary schools of which 1 is Madrasa and 1 a private school (Table 6.2). The government upper primary school is situated on its northern part. The transportation system in this panchayat is good, with local bus and motor van services in operation (see Figure 6.10).
Figure 6.10
RANGILABAD PANCHAYAT
Block: Magrahat-I

Source: Block Development Office, Magrahat I Block and Field Survey, 2013-14

Figure 6.11
SRICHANDRA PANCHAYAT
Block: Magrahat-I

Source: Block Development Office, Magrahat I Block and Field Survey, 2013-14
Table: 6.1: Current Scenario of Primary Schools

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<thead>
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<td>Regular SSK Aided &amp; Madrasa (recognised) Private (Unaided)</td>
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<td>27 9 -</td>
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Source: Census 2011, DISE School Report Card 2013-14
v. **Srichandra Panchayat**

Srichandra Panchayat comes under Magrahat-I block. There are 9 villages and 40 habitations. The total population of the panchayat is 15107 of which 11 percent is SC population. There are a total 17 primary schools of which 4 are private unaided schools. These primary schools together cater to 14 habitations. The rest of the habitations are either closely located to schools or have very few inhabitants. In fact, there are some schools (government schools) which are located within one km distance from each other. For example, Srichandra FP and Ruipukuria SSK are situated within 0.5 km radius; and Bagakhargachi FP and Chak Debughosh FP are situated within 0.4km radius (see Figure 6.11). The study has revealed the existence 6 sets of primary schools located within less than one km distance from each other. There are two upper primary schools (Table 6.2) located on the western and eastern sides of the panchayat. All the habitations have good road connectivity with these schools.

**Table 6.2: Current Scenario of Upper Primary Schools**

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<th>Panchayat</th>
<th>10 to13+ children**</th>
<th>No of Schools (2013-14)</th>
<th>Enrolment (2013-14)</th>
<th>Teacher in Govt School(2013-14)</th>
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<td>Private (Unaided)</td>
<td>Govt school</td>
<td>Private (Unaided)</td>
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**Based proportion of 10 to 13+ age group from single year age table of population of West Bengal population Census 2011; Source: Census Data 2011 and DISE School Report Card, 2013-14**

6.1.1. **Inequality in Spatial Spread of schools**

Extensive observation of primary schools across all panchayat shows that the spatial spread of schools is not evenly distributed. There are few habitations where more than one schools are situated within the radius of one km however some habitations do not have any schools close by, and the number of such habitations is high in the panchayats of in the forest region. In many areas, more than one schools are situated in close proximity without justifying Right To Education norm. There are several reasons for having primary schools within such short distance as one kilometre, and as
discussed above there is no restriction on having more than one primary school within the radius of 1km of the habitation, provided it is justified in terms of accessibility and need based norms. Establishment of a new school depends on a number of hierarchical decisions. Most of the time, the panchayet applies for school as per requirement of the villages, and the higher authorities sanction schools accordingly.

In the present research, excess schools across the panchayats were identified and maps prepared showing those excess schools. Excess schools in any panchayat were recognised based on six variables – distance of nearest schools, total enrolment of the respected schools, habitation pattern, population of the respected habitations, social category of the habitations and nature of road. At first, road distance between two schools was measured (in km) and such of those schools which were within one km distance were identified. In the next stage, the rationale of establishment of two schools in close proximity was checked with the help of enrolment of respective school, population of the respective habitations, social category of habitations, type of habitation (clustered or isolated) and type of approachable road.

It has been observed that out of total primary schools (157) across the sample there are 20 location in forested region (with 45 percent schools) and 17 locations in non-forested region (with 65 percent schools) where 2 or 3 government run primary schools are located within one km of distance (Figure 6.12). Considering RTE norms related criteria, about 8 percent schools in forested region and 22 percent schools in non-forested region lack justification of their location (Appendix Table 6.1). These schools were either closely located with very few student enrolment, or the population of the habitation was low or not located remotely to warrant a separate school. Further the trend across the region in reduction in birth rate and its effect on school going age population may in turn lead to closure of small schools in smaller habitations as those schools will become economically unviable in terms of appointing teachers and providing physical infrastructure. Hence, alternate policies are required to gather children of nearby habitation in one school to provide the needed infrastructure inputs.

Further, it is seen that the two types of government run schools - regular primary schools and Shishu Sikha Kendras - are located in close proximity in many villages. As discussed in the previous chapters, SSKs are run by the Panchayet & Rural
Development Authority while regular Primary schools are run by the Department of school education. However, both types of schools are under the curriculum-jurisdiction of West Bengal Board of Primary Education. These two administrations are parallel organisations, and the present location of school suggests that they did not have any coordination in opening new schools.

This reveals that the location selection for the schools has been inappropriate. The inappropriate selection of location results in advantage for some children and disadvantage for others. If these schools are relocated in the deprived areas, or two schools are merged and provided with better infrastructure, all the students would get better opportunity for schooling. The detailed scenario of infrastructure of these schools has been discussed later in this research.

These flaws in placements of schools were brought to the notice of the education related stakeholders like elected member of the all panchayat (Panchayat Pradhan) or functionaries like Sub Inspector of school or Academic Supervisors while interviewing them (discussed in detail in the later part). About 67 percent of them did not admit the existence of additional advantage of some areas, as it was in their interest to hide the relative deprivation of some panchayats over the other panchayats. The rest of the members who confessed the anomalies put the blame on former elected members. It is therefore obvious that the present method of selection of sites for school lacks proper deliberation. The decision of panchayet is often influenced by political considerations and location of a school sometimes becomes a clear political issue.

These apart, it is seen that that the number of upper primary schools is not sufficient in the panchayats in the forested areas. After completing primary school, students of some habitations have to travel more than 3 km to reach any upper primary school. Walking such long distances is plainly difficult for young children particularly in areas with harsh and unfriendly geographical features.

There is apparent disparity in the distribution of schools between forested and non-forested panchayats. For example, in eleven of the panchayats in the non-forested region, the schools are located in such a manner that children from almost every habitation have access to a school. However, the situation is visibly different in panchayats in the forested region, where the extent of land is large, population high
and transportation facilities insufficient. Also, the study has revealed the existence of a few habitations which have poor access (road connectivity) to schools. This is a clear denial of opportunity to continue education after Class-IV for children in these habitations.

Figure 6.12: Primary Schools within One km of Distance

Forest Panchayats
Non-forested Panchayats

Source: Block Development Office of respected Blocks, South 24 Parganas district and Field Survey, 2013-14
Section B

6.2. Stakeholder’s Perception about Elementary Education

Results of analysis of data from DISE and primary data obtained through school inventory and teacher made achievement tests on a sample of 31 schools located in 11 panchayats randomly selected from two blocks each located in forest and non-forest regions of 24 South Paragana district were presented in the previous chapters. Analysis was aimed at:

- describing the status primary schooling in the district
- comparing enrolment, retention and achievement across forest and non-forest regions
- comparing achievement of children across different categories of students based on their parental and home backgrounds,
- comparing achievement of children across categories of schools based on infrastructure and teacher strength
- comparing achievement of children studying in Shishu Shiksha Kendras run by Panchayat department and regular primary schools run by District Primary Education Board formed by Department of School Education.

The analysis indicated that while enrolment of children in primary schools is nearing universal and retention of children is improving over the years under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. But the picture of primary education in terms of learning outcomes of students after completing primary education is not satisfactory. Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) for the year 2013-14 with respect to West Bengal, Achievement Survey conducted Utkarsha Abhiyan (2013-14) and also the achievement tests administered by present researcher in a sample of Schools in the 24 Paragana district show a very school low outcomes in Mathematics and Language. There exist considerable differences even within this low level performance across different geographical, and socio-economic categories of districts, and across different categories of students as revealed by field study in 24 South Paraganas.

In the present section an attempt is made to locate any plausible explanatory factor to account for the failure in ensuring comparable school quality through interactions with field level school authorities, teachers, parents and representatives of local self governments in the form of Panchayats. The central objective of Right to
Education Act of 2009 (RTE 2009) and its adaptation at the state level is to guarantee measurable and satisfactory school outcomes for all children in West Bengal.

6.2.4. Interviews with Field Level Functionaries

Interviews were held with the field level functionaries like Sub Inspector (SI) of school, Academic Supervisors of SSK, resource teachers, members of gram panchayats or Panchayat Pradhans. The sample schools are spread over five educational circles - two in Basanti block, one in Mathurapur-II block, one in Diamond Harbour-I block and one in Magrahat-I block. All the SIs (five circles), seven panchayat pradhans and in their absence four secretaries of panchayats (total eleven panchayats) and three Academic Supervisors of SSKs were interviewed and group discussion held with the teachers, resource teachers and parents whose children are in primary schools.

The discussions with the above functionaries and insights gained from field level observations are summarised in the following paragraphs.

6.2.4.1. Factors Emerging from Interviews on Geographical Access to School

In regard to geographical access to schools, most of the functionaries reported that they follow the neighbourhood norm of RTE. As stated by them, these functionaries are not associated with higher level planning, their basic role as field level functionaries being to respond to directions of their higher offices and take specific action or ask for specific information. They usually get circulars and take action according to that. As one of the SI said "we just follow the norm and nothing to do with the access, we only supply information upward or downward sought by them".

In regard to overall geographical accessibility of schools in the respective circles, the SIs in general stated that every village has schools within the stipulated norm, though there is shortage of upper primary schools in every circle; also that action cannot be taken on the accessibility problem until the demand comes from village level. To our question about the absence of schools in some habitations that are normatively entitled to get school, the reply of SI of Mathurapur Circle was ‘in our circle there is no such habitation, if demand comes from panchayat level we will forward it to the higher authority.’ Basanti circle SI accepted that there are some habitations without school, and they are trying to establish school as early as possible in these habitations.
The findings from the present research shows that over the last few decades, several new schools have been opened, covering most of the habitations particularly in the non-forested region, making little scope for opening new schools. In fact, the field level survey could identify several schools which are located very close to each other (often within km) without any justification. The functionaries were quizzed how new schools were opened in any habitation, and why some schools were located within one km of distance. It became clear from their response that initiative for new school does not emerge from the department of education; instead it depends on the initiatives taken up by the representatives of the people at the panchayat level as also the response of the education department to these initiatives, through verifications. Excerpts of the field interview given below are illustrative.

When asked how the decision to open schools is taken, a SI in Mathurapur block said, "We do not decide about the opening of a school. It has to come from local people. Local people can only know and feel their problem. We cannot feel the need of a school in a particular place. The proposal comes from panchayat to SI office which is in turn circulated to Block Development Office and BLRO office. Finally a combined report goes to District Primary School Council (DPSC) and District Project Officer, and they take appropriate decision."

The SI at Magrahat-I block while discussing about the location of school said "Getting land at appropriate location for school is an issue. Land deed has to be produced with the proposal for schools. In many cases, land owner is not ready to hand over his land as the cost of land is very high at present. Hence, schools are established only where land is available.”

One of the panchayat secretaries, i.e. of in Mathurapur block said, “new schools are opened entirely due to political reasons. Political parties try to open schools based on polling booth. There are many areas where school is necessary but there is no demand from panchayat level due to political reasons. One primary school was sanctioned in this panchayat (in Maitigheri habitation, Mathurapur-II block) before the State Assembly election, but after change in government the land owner refused to give land”.

Another panchayat secretary, i.e. of Mgrahat-I block said ‘‘decision on new schools is totally a political decision; I will not comment on that’’. Reference of this sort of political interference was made by many of the field level functionaries.

To the question, why some schools are located within one km of distance, three fourth the number of the SIs answered that generally all the schools are located as per the norm of RTE, and if there are schools located within one km distance, it is only in areas that have difficult terrains or lack roads. According to the other SIs, it is generally impossible to locate two schools within one km because before establishing a school, field visits are done many times.

A SI from Basanti block said ‘‘We ensure it by conducting inspection that there was no primary schools within 2 km and we check the number of school going children, i.e. those in age group 6 to 13 which should be more than 20, and that land is available for school. We give priority to SC/ST as also isolated habitations for opening new schools’’

According to the Academic Supervisors of SSKs in Basanti block, ‘‘SSKs should be located in those areas where socially backward people are residing. Besides, new school should be located at least 1km away from regular primary schools. The selection of the venue, teachers, etc., is being done by the local level politicians without consulting local people’’.

When asked why in many places regular primary schools and SSKs are located very closely, the reply of the SIs was that they do not have much idea about SSKs, and there was lack of coordination between these two types of government run organisations. One of the SIs in Mathurapur-II block said, ‘‘I don’t know who runs those schools’’. This is very a peculiar situation because both these types of government organisations are functioning in one and the same village to spread education among children with identical syllabus, but strangely, there is no coordination among them.

Gram Panchayats perform the tasks of the government at the local level, and primary education is deemed as one of their chief responsibilities. Pradhans were asked about the role of panchayat in establishing new schools. Ninety percent of
Pradhans said that it is the ruling political party that decides the requirement of schools and location of schools.

One Panchayat Pradhan in Magrahat-I block said, “panchayat members together with the affluent people of the village decide about the requirement of new schools and location of school. A villager has to confirm his willing to donate his land for school to the District Primary School Council. We then send the demand to the education department. At present, we don’t need any primary school.”

One Panchayat Pradhan from Basanti blocks said, “there is not enough schools in our panchayat. Moreover the condition of roads is also very bad. There are few metalled roads in the northern part but the other parts of the villages have brick roads which are broken. Panchayat has applied for primary school and SSKs for the minority habitations, but in the last ten years only one new primary school was sanctioned and one primary school upgraded to upper primary.”

As reported by all the panchayat pradhans of the forested block there are not enough primary schools and upper primary schools in the village. Reference to political interference in opening new schools also emerged in the discussion with village pradhans. About 20 percent of village pradhans stated that if they were not from the ruling party the proposals for new schools in their village are rejected again and again. To our question why some of the schools are very closely located and some habitations have no school at all, the common answer was “those schools were established by the previous government, we don’t have any idea”.

A panchayat pradhan from Basanti block said, “I am the only elected member who is not from the ruling party. I don’t get any help from higher authorities. Demand for school was rejected every time I made one. They decide about my village. New schools have been sanctioned recently, but I don’t know anything”. A similar statement was made by another panchayat pradhan, i.e of Mathurapur-II block.

From the above field realities, it can be surmised that the expansion and access of schooling facility depends upon demand factors. The demand for school in a given locality emerges from the local power politics. It has been also observed that political
influence in opening schools is higher in the forested region than in the non-forested region.

6.2.4.2. Factors Emerging from Interviews on Enrolment, Retention and Infrastructures of Schools

Discussion with the grass root level functionaries revealed that generally SI office monitors enrolment, retention and infrastructure quality and requirement of any schools. They gather regular information about these factors. Regarding the nature and source of information about school in each of the blocks, the discussions revealed that Head Masters/Head Teacher provide the current information about their school. Generally, schools provide a pay slip return every month along with information on current enrolment, gender-wise and category-wise classifications of children and teachers’ detail. Besides they also provide information about infrastructure like number of classrooms, status of the school building, demand for infrastructure, number of teachers working, demand for additional teachers, etc. Also provided is information about several bank accounts maintained by the school, etc. SIs send these information routinely to the district level office for physical storage. Based on the information, the DPSC prepares a development report. The following excerpts are from the field functionaries on the notes on enrolment, retention and infrastructure.

As SI of Basanti blocks who has more than ten years experience said, ‘‘enrolment of students has increased and there is an increasing need to upgrade the school to Upper Primary. After Sarva Siksha Mission started in 2001-02 there has been gradual improvement in all the schools. SSM releases grants for civil activities like construction of new school building, additional class rooms, toilet, drinking water, etc. Besides, there are schemes for SC, ST and other backward class children. Local people and stake holders in the system are involved by co-opting women’s groups and other self-help groups. The RTE norm has made this involvement more active.’’

Another SI from Mathurapur South circle said, ‘‘the mid day meal scheme has played a very important role in enhancing the enrolment and reducing drop out in schools. The socio-economic background of most of the students is very poor. Hence, getting a meal not only improves the health of student but also student enrolment and also retention of children. Self-help
groups and mother-teacher committees are involved in this process, which again is a positive aspect.’’

On the question of the major issues that need to be improved in the circle in which they were working (as perceived on the basis of their own experience and knowledge) most of the SIs from non-forested blocks said that there was a felt need for an upper primary school in their circle. Further, the SIs from forested block reiterated that many areas lack primary schools and that the entire region needs upper primary schools.

As reported by both teachers and block-level functionaries, most of the planning related to schools is based on student enrolment figures which are quite often manipulated. Our discussions with the Resource Teachers revealed that teachers inflate enrolment figures to ensure that the school is not merged with another school, citing low enrolment. This is particularly true for the SSKs. Another reason is the cost of mid day meal which is currently Rs. 3.44 per student per day (2013-14), and the number of students is often inflated in order to provide a better meal to the students. Hence the teachers inflate enrolment figure.

Finding out the number of drop out and out of school children is one of the duties of school functionaries. Regarding drop out and out of school children, most of the resource teachers from the non-forested block said that there was very few school drop-out children in their circle, and that they always ensure that dropped out children, if any, are traced brought back to school. However the functionaries of forested block reported that there were indeed some dropped out children, and they were unable to trace some of them, as they might have migrated to the city or other states as labourers, or took up employment in the fishers of the block.

When asked about the infrastructure quality and grant to the schools, the functionaries reported that DPSC is the authority for all infrastructure grants, and that DPSC processes the request for recognition of new primary schools, school buildings, allocates funds for various infrastructures, teacher recruitment, salary disbursement of the primary school teachers, etc. SSM also provides infrastructure to schools, and such infrastructure is provided according to demand from school based on enrolment.

During school survey, many head teachers complained about the influence exerted by political lobbies on SIs in sanctioning infrastructure like additional
classroom, repair of rooms, etc. They also complained that schools have often to wait for long to get grants. In particular, the teachers from Magrahat-I block said that teachers are allotted on the basis of political preferences. Hence, the researcher asked about the criterion for selection of schools for augmenting infrastructure like additional classrooms, toilet, etc., as also the number of teachers.

The SI of Magrahat-I one block said, ‘‘there is a requirement format made by school education department as RTE norm. Head teachers fill up the form and give it to respective inspectors of schools, in the circle meeting. It is based on this information that infrastructures are allotted to schools’’. When asked about the criteria he would adopt for identifying schools to provide infrastructure, the SI said, ‘‘preference is given to SC/ST dominated habitations or the remote habitations. But sometimes things do not happen according to our specifications. Sometimes political big-wigs like MLAs ask for additional infrastructure, and naturally preference is given to them. We send the request to DPO and they decide the matter.’’

Teacher recruitment and their placement in different schools is an important activity of the block level and circle level educational office. As per government norm, the District Primary School Council prepares a report showing the number of vacancies in sanctioned posts, medium-wise and category-wise, plus vacancies anticipated to occur against the sanctioned strength of assistant teachers within the next 12 months from the date of advertisement. Based on this report the Director of School Education under the West Bengal Board of Primary Education conducts teacher recruitment.

In response to the question, as to how teacher vacancies are filled up in the block, the SI of Magrahat-I said, “Most of the time sanctioned post are less than the required posts. When the sanctioned posts are less than the required number of posts, the criteria like teacher-student ratio is considered.’’ But this comment contradicts the assertion by a teacher in Magrahat-I block. Quoting examples, the teacher said ‘‘the teachers of the school who are associated with CPIM (political party) backed primary teachers' association are not
getting teachers. Only TMC (political party) associated schools are getting teachers.’’

Regarding the role of panchayat on enrolment, retention and infrastructure, resource teachers said that panchayat sends candidates to the School Management Committee (SMC). As per RTE norm, one-third the number of members of SMC are to be nominated from among the elected members of the local authority, and the panchayat identifies such members. However, panchayat seldom spends time on academic matters and limits itself to construction of new school buildings and other infrastructure related matters.

During informal discussion with resource teachers, one of the resource teachers from Basanti block said, ‘‘panchayat members do nothing for schools. We do household survey to find out dropped out children and ask panchayat members to join us in the survey being conducted in their village, but nobody turns up, except when there is any construction related activity planned in schools involving money.’’

Similar comments were heard during informal discussion with resource teachers of non-forested blocks also. In Diamond Harbour-I block one resource teacher said ‘‘panchayat only works for their political and economic profit. They try to open schools in their land or club so that the school grant can be used for their own purpose’’. This researcher has no reason to doubt the veracity of the teacher’s assertion. Swarnakarpura SSK in Dimond Harbour-I block is functioning in a single (small classroom), very stuffy with no light and devoid of any learning environment. There is one toilet which is locked, and used solely by the owner of the building. Infrastructure grant comes indeed, but is seldom used. Teachers vouch as having seen bricks bought for construction, but does not know how the bricks have disappeared.
The above excerpts from the field diary indicate that there is shortage of upper primary schools in the entire region. Mid day meal scheme has indeed helped to improve school enrolment. However, sanction of school infrastructure and recruitment of teachers are often influenced by political power play.

6.2.4.3. Factors Emerging from Interviews on Quality and Outcome of Students

According to the SIs, they are not directly linked with learning outcome of students, though they visit the school to monitor and also help in its functioning. The BRC and CRC coordinators visit schools to arrange training for CRC coordinators, teachers & VEC members; provide academic guidance to teachers at cluster level meetings and also in schools. During 2013, with the aim of understanding the quality of education, a process of assessment was taken up jointly by Department of School Education and Paschim Banga Sarva Siksha Mission, named ‘Utkarsha Abhiyan’. This assessment was conducted by the resource teachers at both circle level and cluster level under the guidance of SIs.

When enquired about their role in educational outcome of the students, one of the SIs, i.e. of Mathurapur-II block said, ‘‘we have nothing to do with outcome. Student’s result is related to teacher’s performance. You have to ask the teachers about outcome. We are only involved with infrastructure, grant, tracking mid day meal-scheme and other school related matters.’’

Another SI from Magrahat-I block said, ‘‘we are trying our best for better outcomes but we are over burdened. We have to attend too many meetings at short notice. We have to maintain the salary and pension records of teachers and also answer related queries.’’ Work pressure seems to be the reason for their inability to make regular school visits and confine to only routine visits. The above situation is related to outcome though indirectly.

The SI of Basanti block said that poor outcome of students is mostly due to the poor economic background of the students and illiteracy of parents.
The same question was asked to the resource teachers also. According to them, teacher shortage in most of the schools is the main cause for poor results. There are also other problems like inadequate infrastructures. However, they stressed the shortage of teachers as the principal reason for poor results.

A resource teacher from Basanti block had this to say: ‘‘there are five classes in a school - class I to IV plus recently added pre-primary section. Most schools in our circle have only two teachers. The head teacher has to visit SI office at least two days in a week in connection with administrative work, and one teacher has to manage the whole school on such occasions. They have to look after the mid day meals also. Hence outcome is poor? ’’

Similar was the remark of another Resource Teacher from Magrahat-I block. He said, ‘‘teachers are burdened with too much administrative and training related work throughout the year, e.g. teachers who do not have 50 percent marks in Higher Secondary have to undergo training; those without basic training degree need to undergo training; there are also subject wise training, environment awareness training, frequent meeting etc. Besides, teachers are sometimes engaged in making voter list, census report etc. When they will teach? ’’

Another Resource Teacher in Magrahat South circle had this to say: ‘‘family background is responsible for poor result. ‘As you sow, so shall you reap’. Illiterate parent cannot expect very good result from his child. Many parents send their children mainly for mid day meal. Mostly, the Muslim families are very big in size in our circle with 5-6 children per family, and these children come to school mainly for food and incentives.’’

The above excerpts provide a general picture of the region where two factors, i.e. teachers’ availability and social background of the students play important roles in student’s outcome.
6.2.5. Focus Group Discussion with Teachers

For the purpose of the present research, 14 FGD were made with teachers, of which one was held with 11 teachers at Block level when they had assembled in a training programme. Remaining FGDs were held in schools. In all about 40 teachers participated in the focus group discussions. The discussion was focussed on the perceptions of teachers with respect to factors affecting positively or negatively on school enrolment, retention and learning outcomes.

6.2.5.1. Discussion on Enrolment and Retention in Schools

Teachers reported that both student enrolment and retention of students had improved in their school. By and large they attribute this development to the offer of incentives like free textbooks, attendance scholarships and midday meals. According to them, especially the midday meal scheme has attracted poor families send their children, both boys and girls to school. Muslims who constitute a significant proportion of the district's population have started sending their children to school. One of the teachers from Kankandighi Gomermir Free Primary school said, “Enrolment in our school has increased. The parents are now more aware about the need for enrolling their children in school. The locality where my school is situated is mainly dominated by Muslim population and most of the families are from very poor economic background. Most parents are seasonal workers. Midday meal is very helpful for their children. But these students are first generation learners and we try our best to teach them and make them continue in school.”

A teacher from Murokhali (Teorpur) Shishu Shiksha Kendra (SSK) pointed out, “60 percent population of this village is from poor economic background. Parents are unable to provide food for their children; it is more economical for them to send children to school. You can see students waiting for mid-day meal from the first period itself.”

On the other hand, monetary incentives like scholarship help retention. One of the teachers attending the training at block level opined that, “The students from lower economic background are getting scholarship of Rs 1000 if they get 50 percent marks. This type of incentives helps to retain children in school.”
A rare insight was revealed in the discussions with a teacher of Haskhali SSK which is located in Diamond Harbour-I block. A teacher from this school said, “Enrolment has increased, but enrolment does not show the qualitative status of school because enrolment figures are often over reported. We get very little money for mid day meal (about Rs.3 per students per day), so we have to inflate enrolment figures to claim grants for providing quality food to students.”

6.2.5.2. Deficient Infrastructure
But teachers point out that infrastructure has not kept up with increase in enrolment and improved retention of students in school. Teachers from Murokhali Shishu Shiksha Kendra pointed out that the school has more than 250 students but do not have sitting arrangement for class I and II. Pre-primary section has also been added to make the class over crowded. During rainy season, one of the classrooms has to be used for cooking midday meal as there is no kitchen shed.

Teachers from Charbidya Free Primary school also pointed out that the enrolment and attendance has increased enormously during the past few years because of midday meal scheme. But school lack adequate infrastructure like no separate kitchen shed, usable girls’ toilet.

Discussion with teachers from Karamdinibati FP revealed a similar situation. The school has around 350 students with four rooms. But all rooms are not in good condition. The school serves predominantly the Muslim locality. One of the teachers had this to say- “We have shortage of classroom. This is a Muslim neighbourhood, and student enrolment is high. If all students come, providing class-rooms becomes a problem. Classes are often conducted outside on the open field. As the number of students would be less in higher sections (grade III and IV), we can provide sitting chairs and tables for them. Children in the Pre-primary section, Grade I and II sit on the floor.”

Teachers of Taldaha Uttarapara FP complained that the School Management Committee has neglected the development of the school by not utilising the grants given to the school for augmenting the infrastructure. One of them complained “We are struggling to get basic amenities like class rooms, drinking water or toilets. Students are sitting on unfinished class room-floor, and even sitting mat is not
provided to them. The condition of other infrastructures like libraries, book bank, computer etc, is even poorer.’’

Pakurtala special Free Primary school is doing relatively well in terms of teaching and learning. However the teachers here also complain of neglect by authorities. The school is located 2 KMs away from the nearest motorable road and hence teachers have to walk to and fro. One of the lady teachers pointed out the approach to the school and said "look at the small stretch of road connecting our school gate, it is a small bridge made by two bamboos, and this is very unstable. It is very risky also. If you are not attentive, you may fall down. There were several incidents of children falling down in the water body. We had appealed many times to the authorities, but no action was taken.’’

6.2.5.3. Learning Outcomes

Before visiting the schools the present researcher had administered teacher made tests to class IV students. The analysis of student performance revealed very low levels of learning. One of the common issues raised in the discussions with the teacher was low performance of children on the tests.

   The discussions with teachers revealed the following factors as reasons for low performance of the students in their schools:

   • Inadequate infrastructure like classrooms sheds for cooking midday meal, serviceable toilets for girls etc.
   • Illiteracy of parents
   • Lack of required number of teachers,
   • location of schools with poor connectivity
   • curriculum load
   • administrative load
   • no detention policy

   Inadequate infrastructure has already been focussed in relation to the reality of increased enrolment and retention. Accommodating large number of children in the existing classrooms leads to overcrowding and difficulty in giving individual attention. This problem affects classes I and II (sometimes preschool attachment) more as compared to higher classes. Discussion with three teachers of Murokhali
(Teorpur) SSK revealed the following factors: The area is populated mostly by Muslims. The school has a large number of students. There is a shortage of infrastructure – shortage of room, no sitting arrangement for class I and II students, no kitchen shed for cooking MDM. MDM is cooked outside in open field and during rainy season class rooms are used for cooking. So classes are hampered. Teachers find it difficult to conduct classes in such an environment and they get much reduced time for teaching. Besides, there is also a shortage of teachers. The enrolment capacity of the school is about 250 with four teachers. Recently pre-primary grade has also been included. Hence pupils of pre-primary grade and grade-I are made to sit together. If all students are present, one room has to accommodate more than 60 students. The situation is particularly grave in grade I and pre-primary class rooms where more than 75 students sit together and one teacher has to conduct class, and hence the teacher cannot take care of individual children. Besides, teachers have to do administrative work, supervise MDM, etc. which reduces teaching time. Moreover, as this is a Muslim majority area and most of the students are first generation learners, so students do not get much support at home to learn their lessons. But attendance rate is high. Most of the students are from poor economic background and they send their children for MDM.

One of the teachers also added that, “Teachers are over-burdened with administrative and other duties like supervision of the Mid-Day Meal and are thus unable to find time for teaching. We are unable to pay individual attention to weak students.” Another teacher from this school said “We have three rooms, but no sitting arrangement in the rooms; enrolment is about 250. There is no separate kitchen and in summer, food is prepared outside the building, but during monsoon we have to prepare food inside the class room which hampers teaching.”

In another discussion held at Charabidya FP, the teachers said they cannot take care of individual students as school has around 230 students. They conduct grade I and II class together. They also cited the ‘no detention policy’ which create problems in teaching-learning process. As the students know that they will automatically pass to the next grade, they lose interest in learning.

In FDG held at Karamdinibati FP while discussing about poor learning outcomes, teachers pointed out the high teacher student ratio of the school. Also, teachers do not
get the required time for teaching. Naturally, managing such a huge class is a big task. They also cited the poor parental background, huge families and unbearable home environment of student as reasons for poor educational outcome.

FGD held at Srichandra FP also revealed the problem of shortage of time for teaching. According to teachers there, providing MDM every day takes away a lot of teaching time due to the need to devote time to supervise MDM preparation in addition to teaching. Besides in recent years the workload of the teachers has increased as RTE Act mandates keeping detailed data on tasks like maintaining student profile. Always one teacher has to engage himself in administrative work which also reduces teaching time According to one teacher ‘if we spend quality time on students, they will surely do good in exam whatever family background they have. We have to create interest in the subject taught to them. But for that we require adequate time."

The shortage of time in school was also raised in the discussion held at Bagaria Kgargachi FP, Chakdaha FP, Ramchandrapur FP and FGD held at the Block level training centre. The FGD in Bagaria Kgargachi FP revealed the very high enrolment of in the school and the availability of only two teachers, of which one has to engage in administrative work and most of the time and one has to conduct classes. Evidently, it quite difficult to handle four classes by two teachers. So, the teachers can’t devote quality time to students who need individual care. More teachers can't be asked for as the enrolment is low and the school already has PTR as per RTE norm.

Chakdaha FP is a two teacher school with 60 students and two rooms. The discussion with the teachers highlighted the fact that the students are not getting good score because of shortage of teachers. As per RTE norm PTR supports only two teachers for the school and hence the school is not eligible for additional teachers. But in real practice, one teacher has to busy himself in administrative work and another teacher has to conduct classes, and therefore teachers do not get adequate time to teach. Besides 2 classes are conducted in one room in this school, which is also a problem.

The factors emerged from the FGD held at Ramchandrapur FP are: The enrolment has increased in the last few years. But the school suffers from shortage of
teachers and room. The school has 150 students. The teachers cannot get adequate time for teaching. One teacher has to engage himself in administrative work and two teachers have to conduct classes. So they are unable to quality time for teaching.

Different points emerged from the FGD held at Block level training centre. One of the factors responsible for poor learning outcome as stated by the teachers is the negligence of teachers towards their assigned duty. A very positive-minded teacher from Kautala panchayat said, “If we are ready to give cent percent of our time and effort in school, any child can learn. Student’s learning depends on teacher’s hard work. We are blaming students for lower performances; but we are not doing our duty. We come to school late, close school as early as at 3.30 and not at 4.30 pm which is the regular closing hour; how students will do good in this situation?”

Similar was the comment of a teacher from Pakurtala Special FP which is good school with very disciplined students. According to the head teacher of the school, the school, established in 1954, has produced several good students who are in prestigious jobs now. The main focus of the teachers during the FGD is on responsibility of teachers on student which is the main factor of learning outcome. To quote a teacher, “good result of students mainly depends on teachers. If we spent adequate time on student they will bound to learn. It is only the dedication of teachers that led to success.”

In the same discussion at Block level training centre a teacher from Kashinagar panchayat said ‘‘Syllabus is not proper for children. It is too lengthy.’’ Similar was the comment given by another teacher who said “School working-days in an academic year is 240. Out of this, some days are lost in taking exams and about 210-220 days are left for teaching. Is it impossible for a teacher to teach lessons from a 300 page text book in 200 days for children who are mostly first generation learners?”

Another point emerged in the above said discussion point is the problem of ‘no detention’ policy. Some teachers said government rule like ‘no detention policy’ is responsible for poor results. All most all of the teachers expressed their disagreement with ‘no detention policy’.
The same problem was also stated in the FGD held at Ramchandrapur FP. The teachers of Ramchandrapur FP also complained about the ‘no detention policy’ which make the teaching-learning situation more difficult. A teacher said, “No- detention policy makes the situation much difficult for us. Students know that they will be automatically promoted to the next class and they know very well that the teacher cannot scold them to make him or her to concentrate in the class. But if you take everything away from the teacher, then how does the teaching-learning process take place?”

6.2.6. Focus Group Discussion with Parents

The focus groups were so designed as to capture parents’ viewpoints on education - their expectation, satisfaction level and suggestions. They were informed that tests were conducted on their children and the result was far from satisfactory. They were also questioned as to what according to them were the reasons for children obtaining such low marks? The parents differed in their judgement about the poor scores of their children, but their key observations were that: classes are overcrowded and hence teachers are unable to monitor the students individually. Consequently, teachers cannot identify students’ weaknesses and address them specifically. They also complained that sometimes teachers are irregular (absent) and arrive late to class in some schools. They also reported that the children often sit in the class without any teacher to teach. Therefore, most of the time, students spend time playing and their teachers do not check whether they are absent or not. Besides, most of the parents are illiterates or can simply just sign. There is nobody to help the student at home. But, in spite of being economically poor, the parents are forced to send their wards to private tuitions to make them better in studies. The parents were also complaining about lack of proper infrastructure (proper class room facilities, building, drinking water, separate toilet for boys and girls, bench etc.). Another acute problem in the panchayats in the forest block is the lack of safe and secure communication systems (roads and transport system) linking schools with habitations.

It has been observed from group discussion with parents that all parents including illiterate parents want to educate their child. During discussions, more than 70 percent parents said they attend school meeting. The following excerpts highlight the reasons of poor educational outcome, negligence of children as also the
explanation given by parents for their educational deprivations. Some of the responses highlight the reasons for poor educational outcome and consequent failure in retaining the children; some reflect parents’ demands for individual child-care in school; and some reflect the lack of faith in the school in providing useful education.

The following excerpts provide a summary of the discussions held with parents:

In Amjhara village, a girl’s parent (father) said “there is only one government school in our village. All children go to that school. Therefore there is overcrowding in the school. The children are learning practically nothing, and they can’t write even the alphabets; a 4th standard student can’t read first standard text book”. Mother of another girl had this to say: ‘children go to school, play, eat and return home’.

The women who cooks mid day meal in the school in Kankandighi village (mother of Abirul Purokait, a student) said that children were not properly cared for in the school. The mother of another student had complaints to make about the functioning of the schools. She said, “Teachers are least interested in teaching and they come late and leave early; teachers are found engaged in reading newspaper. Classes often get terminated after serving mid day meal.”

In Charabidya panchayat, a mother of three children said, “My daughters study in classes II, V and VI. The older daughter studies in secondary school and the younger daughters study in primary school. We encourage our children to study well. Both primary school and upper primary schools are over-burdened. There are only two teachers in the primary school and one teacher is always engaged in paper work. All the children sit in one room. Though the teachers try to teach students, they don’t get time to take individual care of them.”

The crucial role of mid-day meal in enrolment and retention of students finds illustration in by Firdousi Laskar’s case. The girl belongs to Muslim community and a resident of Kautala panchayat. Her father is an agricultural labourer and gets only seasonal work. He has seven brothers and one sister, and five of the brothers are older than him. As expressed by the boy’s father, mid day meal has helped them a lot. He doesn’t know about his children’s schooling, and also lacks the money to spend on children’s education. Hence he doesn’t have any problem in sending his children to school.”
A group of mothers from Srichandra panchayat (non-forested region) said, “Students are learning nothing from school. The school is only for having food as midday meal. Teachers do not take class. They not even take regular attendance of students.’’

Another group of guardians said, “We are illiterates. We cannot teach children at home. We have no money to send them for private tuition. The teachers are also don’t take care about student. There is no discipline at school. No infrastructure. Hence the outcome is poor.’’

Exactly opposite was the opinion of another group of parents from Kashinad panchayat, Mathurapur-II block (forested region). According to them, teachers are dedicated, take care of the students, and therefore they are happy with the teachers.

Susmita Manna from Kasinagar village, Mathurapur-II block studying in grade IV scored very well in the test administered by the researcher. Her mother said, “Our village school is very good. In spite of many infrastructural problems like shortage of bench table etc. teachers are very responsible about their work’’. Similar were the comments of several parents in that locality.

Likewise, the mother of Kajal Ghorami said, “I have four school going children and my husband works as daily labourer earning about Rs 8000 per month. My children are studying very well in the village school. Without teachers’ help it would not possible for us to continue children’s education.’’

As revealed by another focus group from Rangilabad panchayat, there are only two teachers in the school near their habitation, and has nil infrastructure, while another school in the nearby habitation (Rajballavpur) has four teacher and has been getting good results. Hence, parents are taking transfer from Rangilabad school and sending their children to Rajballavpur School.

In a remote SC habitation in Charabidya village near Sundarban forest several parents complained about the problem of transport in sending children to school.

Jharna Mondal’s father said, “There is no good road in this locality. We wish to send our children to good school, but we have no scope. The village road is so bad that during monsoon it is very vulnerable.’’
Puja’s mother from the same habitation said “The nearest school is very bad. The school had one teacher till the last year. Now another teacher has come on deputation. The condition of school building is very poor; there is no floor, roof leaks. No mats for students. Teachers don’t teach.”

Mani Biswas (Charabidya Village) is very irregular to the school. His parents are daily wage labourers. According to his mother, children have to walk one km to go to school; the road is along the water body and slippery, so they do not go.

In discussions on their suggestions for improving schooling and students’ outcome, the parents said “Teachers should take proper care of the child. If they spend time on students and give individual care, student will learn.”

A group of parents (in Rangilabad panchayat, non-forested region) expressing similar views and said: “If the teachers use teaching-learning material like blackboards, maps, globes, charts etc. and make class interesting, the student will naturally learn and will get a holistic education. If the teachers pay attention to the weaker students like slow learners, students from Scheduled caste/ Scheduled tribes/ girl children etc the outcome will be good.”

Another group in Serpur village (in non-forested region) has this to say: “Mid day meals disturb the teaching-learning process. Teachers are always busy with meals and classes are hampered. Whatever they earn is sufficient for their family. They don’t require food from schools. They want quality education.”

A group of parents from Dimond Harbour-I block also said that increasing the number of teachers was the only solution to the problem of poor learning outcome.

Many parents from non-forested block are opposed to the mid day meal scheme but parents from the forest block are in favour of mid-day meal scheme. According to them, mid-day meal scheme indeed helps and it has generated job opportunities for women as cooks or helpers. But when they were asked how to improve the school education they couldn’t reply. Many guardians said “We are poor people, how would we know. Government should know this”.
6.3. Conclusion

The very purpose of focus group discussion was to dispel the difference in perception of stakeholders about the grass-root level reality of teaching-learning. Interviews and Focus Group Discussions were arranged with the stakeholders in elementary education. Interviews were conducted with the Sub Inspectors of regular primary schools and Academic Supervisors of Shishu Shiksha Kendras, panchayat pradhans at panchayat level and School Management Committee member. Focus Group Discussions were held among teachers and parents of the sample panchayats.

The views expressed during interviews with the administrative functionaries make it quite clear that government functionaries are only interested in physical access. Added, they are duty-bound to obey government orders. School inspectors do not know/care about how the teaches teach; their focus is mainly on physical access to schools. The authorities sanction infrastructure grant according to enrolment of schools. Many of them even complained that they are over burdened with work pressure and also mentioned about the political pressure that come in the way of providing equal access to schools in every panchayat.

According to the panchayat pradhan they apply for new schools for school-less habitations according to the demand of local people. But the sanction of new school is depends on degree of political influence. Only certain people get benefit who are related to the higher level political people.

Teachers in both forested and forested complained about the shortage of teachers. According to them poor students outcome is very much related to number of teachers and also infrastructure. It was also mentioned that sanction of teachers and infrastructure is influenced by political factors. They also pointed out that poor outcome of the students are also due to their poor family background. Besides teachers are burdened with too much administrative and training related work throughout the year which reduces teaching time.

Parents also cited the shortage of teachers as responsible for poor school outcomes. According to them if teachers spend time on students and give individual care, student will learn. But teachers are most often busy with administrative work and therefore fail to take individual care. There is mixed opinion on MDM. Some of
the parents are in favour of it as it is helpful for child’s health. But many of them are against it as according to them it hampers the teaching-learning process. A few the parents are happy with the current teaching-learning process in schools. After cross verifying the schools it became known that the children of those parents were studying in schools which have adequate number of teachers and good infrastructure.