ABSTRACT

Inclusive elementary education of a given quality and standard is now a fundamental right of every child in India as per the amended Article 45 of the Indian Constitution (86th amendment), on its location under 21 (A). The consequential legislation, i.e. Right to Education Act of 2009 further strengthens this constitutional provision. Significant efforts have been made in the last sixty seven years to universalize elementary education. At the time of adoption of the Constitution in 1950, the aim was to achieve the goal of Universalisation of Elementary Education within the subsequent ten years i.e. by 1960. But the target date was shifted a number of times. The Education Commission (1964-66), National Educational Policy (1986 and 1992), the District Primary Education Programme, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and the recent Right To Education Act have shown great concern on removal of disparity and also suggested measures for equalisation of educational opportunities by making education a fundamental right of every child between the ages of 6 and 14. Despite all these efforts, there still exist many pockets in the country where inequalities in the field of elementary education persist. It may be noted that the goal of Universalisation of Elementary Education cannot considered successful if any kind of disparities persist in the system of education.

The recent analysis of educational data has pointed out the inequalities in elementary education are still persist in different geographical regions and among various social groups. Some of the states like West Bengal need serious attention, as in these states a large number of children still face difficulties in continuing their study. Hence, for the purpose of the study the state of West Bengal has been selected. Further, the South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal has been selected for a detailed study as the district has two distinct geographical boundaries – half of the district is a forested region (Sundarban mangrove forest) while the other half a non-forested region. The study is based on data collected from primary and secondary sources on the disparities in educational development as also socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the two regions under study.

The enrolment in elementary education has improved in the state over the last decades but the risk of dropping out before completion of elementary education is still high. There exists supply inequality in location of schools and its infrastructures.
Primary education in rural West Bengal is imparted through two types of government institutions- regular primary schools and Sishu Sikha Kendras, and there is a sharp disparity between these two types of school in terms of infrastructure and quality of teachers. Shishu Shiksha Kendras are much poorer in terms of quality of schools.

Further, there has been a sharp deterioration over time in the learning outcome of elementary school age children across the state, which is an alarming situation. These apart, there was decline in absolute number of child population (0-6 years age group) across the state in the last decade. This decline needs to be considered while formulating future policies for universalizing elementary school education in the state.

Finally, the geo-social characteristics of the state and its relation with some educational indicators shows that physiographically, socially and economically undeveloped areas in West Bengal are still facing the problem of under development.

Detailed analysis by comparing two distinct geographical regions in South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal also reveals that over a period of time enrolment has increased but in spite of ‘no detention’ policy there persists high stagnation and retention of children. Moreover, the schools have deficit in infrastructure as well as number of qualified teachers.

Further, a detailed analysis at micro level has found out that the educational achievement across the region is very poor. The poor achievement is related with the socio-economic background of the students. Out of two different geographical regions studied, students in the forested region got poorer mark than their non-forested counterpart. Also revealed by the survey is the fact that Muslim students got very poor marks across the region. Apart from this, children who are studying in Shishu Shiksha Kendras got poor marks compared to regular primary schools. School infrastructure was found to have a close association with test score. Good infrastructure quality of schools helps students to secure good marks. Similarly, the number of qualified teachers in schools also makes huge difference in student’s achievement.

The spatial distribution of schools was also found faulty in many places which gave preference to some habitations. In many places, primary schools have established within one km of distance without sufficient justification for its establishment. Hence, many habitations have more number of schools than required.
Further as the child population has across the district, many small schools were found with less than 50 enrolments. The spatial distribution of schools also shows certain uncovered areas where a school ought to be provided, particularly in the forested region. This reveals that the site selection for the schools has been improper. These apart, it is seen that that the number of upper primary schools is not sufficient in the panchayats in the forested region.

The interviews with the administrative functionaries reveal that government functionaries were only interested in ensuring physical access to school. They do not interfere in the matter of teaching-learning and outcomes. They also mentioned that political pressure often comes in the way of providing equal access to schools. Similar was the opinion of the panchayat pradhans that getting sanction for new schools depend on the degree of political influence. According to the teachers, poor student outcome is very much related to shortage of teachers and also lack of infrastructure. They also expressed that sanction of teachers and infrastructure is generally influenced by political influence. According to the parents, shortage of teachers is responsible for poor outcome and if teachers spend time on students and give individual care, student will learn.

Hence, in the context of RTE Act (2009), the major challenges faced by West Bengal are, improving quality of educational outcomes at elementary level and improving physical access to upper primary stage, given the stated objective of improving the quality of elementary education in the State. Hence the imperative for planning by the government to entitle elementary school age children to their rights and empower the citizens. The present study has identified policy related factors responsible for low learning levels of children in West Bengal in general and in the study sample in particular. The educational policies followed during the decades till 2010 focused more on providing physical access to primary stage by opening schools or other alternate learning centres like SSK within one kilometre radius in order to ensure enrolment and attendance through incentives. Based on the findings, the present research recommends an alternative schooling programme with changes in normative aspects of planning through viable schooling with least or no additional cost at primary school stage.