

# **Primary Education in West Bengal**

**Draft Field Report**

**ESRC Project  
“Rural Poverty, the Developmental State and Spaces of Empowerment in  
Bihar and West Bengal, Eastern India”**

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*New Delhi, October 2000*

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# **1 Introduction**

This report complements the part on primary education of the draft field report written in December 1999 with the analysis of the empirical data.

The analysed data includes:

- 100 questionnaire interviews in a village in central Midnapore district
- 100 questionnaire interviews in a village in east Malda district
- 18 questionnaire interviews with female-headed households (full survey), and 5 interviews with both husband and wife in Midnapore
- 27 logframe interviews in Midnapore district (5 district level, 5 block/circle level, 1 GP level, 6 teacher level, 10 village/ward level)
- 23 logframe interviews in Malda district (4 district level, 4 block/circle level, 1 GP level, 3 teacher level, 11 village/ward level)
- State-level interviews with State Director of DPEP and with Head Education Group of DFID

The structure of this report follows the revised logframe headings: ground realities (organisation, infrastructure); parents and children (including literacy rates, attendance rates, expectations); and processes and policies (including community ownership, policy commitments and funding, teacher recruitment and inspection). Each section ends with a subsection on possible interpretations that relate to core issues of our research such as participation, trust and governance. Due to time constraints, these issues are not taken up separately in a concluding section.

## 2 Intentions and Institutions

### 2.1 Goals and Commitments<sup>1</sup>

The educational goals of the GoWB seem in no way different from the national goals. The national education policy is derived from three types of instruments: the constitution, sectoral national policy documents, and the five-year plans at the national level (Dyer 1999). The *Constitution of India* directs that “the State shall endeavour to provide within a period of 10 years from the commencement of the Constitution, free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of 14 years” (Constitution of India 1950). Obviously, the goal of universal elementary education<sup>2</sup> has not been achieved within ten years (i.e. by 1960). It has been extended subsequent policy to the year 2000 (Subrahmanian, 1999). Now, it seems that the goal of achieving universal primary education has been further postponed to the year 2005 and elementary education to the year 2015 (WB 201).

Only two national education policies have been formulated by the Government of India (GOI), the National Resolution on Education of 1968 (NRE 1968) and the *National Policy on Education 1986* (NPE 1986). The NPE 1986 focuses on disparities of achievement by gender, caste and socio-economic class, enumeration of the infrastructure shortfalls in (particularly rural) schools, inter-regional disparities, the absorption of public expenditure by teachers rather than students, with the per student investment per year declining at both centre and State level; the bias towards urban higher education rather than rural elementary education; and the non-achievement of the target of educational expenditure of 6% of GDP (Subrahmanian, 1999).

The NPE 1986 was accompanied by a Programme of Action (POA 1986), outlining the activities that needed to be undertaken to fulfil policy goals. The revised POA in 1992 notes that the TLC, a post-POA innovation, “has transformed the perception of universal adult literacy from one of hopeless dream to an achievable prospect” (GOI 1992) with its focus on mobilisation campaigns, involvement of voluntary efforts and people's participation, intense learning inputs and, in many cases, speedy achievement of functional literacy (Subrahmanian, 1999).

The POA 1992 has four aims: (1) universal access to primary/elementary education for all children; (2) universal enrolment in primary schools or in the alternative schooling system with equivalent quality; (3) universal retention of enrolled children aged 5-8; (4) improvement of quality of education. The main functional objectives of the POA 1992 are: (1) to reduce difference between gender and social groups in enrolment, dropout and learning achievement to less than 5%; (2) to reduce overall primary dropout rates to less than 10%; (3) to raise average achievement levels by at least 25% and to ensure achievement of basic literacy and numeracy; (4) to provide access to primary schools where possible, or to equivalent non-formal education for all children (quoted in DPEP Perspective Plan, Malda District, 1999).

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<sup>1</sup> This section draws heavily from Chapter 1 of Subrahmanian, Ramya (1999) Coproducing Universal Primary Education in a Context of Social Exclusion: Households, Community Organisations and State Administration in a district of Karnataka, India. PhD Thesis, Open University.

<sup>2</sup> In the West Bengal context, “elementary education” means schooling from class I-VIII, thus including secondary schools (class V-VIII). “Primary education” refers to class I-IV.

Apart from the goals of reducing disparities and improving school infrastructure and the school environment, the POA 1992 emphasised the need for participatory microplanning “in which the teachers and villagers would formulate family-wise and child-wise design of action to ensure that every child regularly attended school or non-formal education centre and completed at least five years of schooling or its non-formal equivalent” (GOI 1992, quoted in Subrahmanian, 1999).

Furthermore, the policy aimed to re-design the curricular content of primary education and to set primary education standards in terms of Minimum Levels of Learning (MLL)<sup>3</sup> for primary schools, non-formal schooling and adult literacy. For, example, the non-formal education curriculum is expected to correspond to MLL standards in order to support the policy goal of “facilitating lateral entry for students of the NFE stream into the formal stream” (GOI 1993:51, quoted in Subrahmanian).

There is also no retention policy at the primary stage, with children being compulsorily promoted regardless of attendance and performance. While the rationale for this policy is presented as a shift of responsibility to teachers, to diagnose and remedy learning problems, rather than placing pressure on children to perform up to measured standards (GOI 1992:107), a compulsory pass policy at primary level usefully prevents the stagnation of children in particular classes, particularly those who attend irregularly, and hence facilitates the achievement of a semblance of universal primary education (Subrahmanian, 1999).

Despite shifts in policy language, critiques of national policy documents by academics and activists focus on the rhetorical language used to state commitments (Weiner 1991), the platitudes made about education that have no bearing on concrete proposals for improvement (Dreze and Sen 1995), unreasonable and over-ambitious goals (ibid.), confusion of objectives, inconsistencies of ends and means and specific contradictions between stated goals and resource allocation (ibid.). Furthermore, all experimentation and innovation in education has been done through schemes and programmes (e.g., OBB, TLC, DPEP), often managed through separate agencies or parallel structures (e.g., National Literacy Mission, DPEP structure) rather than through a systematic review of the functioning of the system as a whole. Schemes have often been ad hoc, started at different times with responsibility dispersed among several agencies under the control of different actors (Subrahmanian, 1999). West Bengal is no exception in this respect (see section 2.2).

In India, the states have the main responsibility for primary/elementary education, including providing infrastructure and employing teachers. The central government spends only a bit more than 2% of the annual budget on education. The 2000-01 budget earmarked 1.1% (Rs. 3,735 crore) for elementary education and 1.4 % for secondary/higher education. Nearly all central spending on elementary education is plan expenditure, and mostly used for educational schemes, such as the District Primary Education Programme, Operation Black Board and Non-Formal Education.

Many states have not even translated the constitutional commitment to making elementary education compulsory. Only 14 states, including West Bengal,<sup>4</sup> have

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<sup>3</sup> For example, literacy has been defined in terms of “the most basic skill of writing and reading one's own name (Tilak, 1990, quoted in Subrahmanian, 1999).

<sup>4</sup>The other states are Karnataka, Assam, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, Haryana, Jammu and Kashmir, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and Kerala (GOI 1997:3, cited in Subrahmanian, 1999).

enacted legislation in this regard. Furthermore, financial commitment to education varies widely between the states. In 1996-97, the larger states allotted between 16-30% of their budget to education, and between 7-18% on elementary education.

West Bengal claims to have the highest budgetary allocation for education in the country (GoWB official website, [www.westbengal.gov.in](http://www.westbengal.gov.in)). Indeed, West Bengal's budgetary allocation for education was amongst the highest in 1996-97. However, the allocation for elementary education of Rs. 737 crore was amongst the lowest in terms of percentage of budget allocations (see table 1). The bulk of educational expenditures are non-plan costs (teacher salaries, etc.). The state government provides free education upto grade VII, free schoolbooks at the primary level and free dresses for SC/ST girls. It also provides the primary schools with a contingency fund of Rs. 22 per month.

Table 1: Budgetary Allocations (percentages) of 17 major states, 1996-97

	Elementary Education*	Higher Education**	Other***	Total on Education
Andhra Pradesh	9	12	2	22
Assam	18	11	1	30
<b>Bihar</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>27</b>
Gujarat	14	10	0	24
Haryana	7	9	0	16
Himachal Pradesh	11	9	0	21
Jammu & Kashmir	8	8	0	17
Karnataka	10	9	0	20
Kerala	14	14	0	28
Madhya Pradesh	15	8	0	23
Maharashtra	9	11	1	21
Orissa	13	10	0	24
Punjab	6	14	0	20
Rajasthan	14	11	1	26
Tamil Nadu	12	11	0	23
Uttar Pradesh	12	9	0	22
<b>West Bengal</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>25</b>
Average (all states)	11	11	1	23

\* class I-VII

\*\* includes secondary, technical and university education,

\*\*\* includes adult literacy, physical education, language development, etc.

Source: Calculated from Ministry of Human Resource Development: Analysis of Budgeted Expenditure on Education 1994-95 to 1996-97.

Table 1 suggests that West Bengal neglects elementary education and tends to favour investments in secondary and higher education. A study using pooled data over the period of 1992-98 and comparing actual state expenditure with a normative figure based on literacy rates, enrolment rates, price levels, etc. came to a similar conclusion. The study found that West Bengal actual expenditure on primary education was 30%

below the normative level. (Bihar was 35% below, UP even 39%). The conclusion was that the actual spending of poorer states on education is lower than their “needs”.<sup>5</sup>

It has generally been acknowledged that the performance of the GoWB in improving elementary education, except for the effective implementation of the Total Literacy Campaign, has been poor:

It is striking ... that energetic activism on the agrarian-reforms agenda went alongside a near total absence of initiative in public policy on other factors that influence well-being [including education]. (Sengupta and Gazdar, p. 194, in Drèze and Sen (1997) *Indian Development: Selected Regional Perspectives*. OUP.)

Section 4 tries to explain why such public initiative was absent in the education sector.

In light of fiscal constraints, the GoWB has started to put more emphasis on more cost-effective alternative child education centres (WB 201). Furthermore, the formal primary school system is supported in 10 districts by DPEP (which in West Bengal is funded by DFID). DPEP invests Rs. 40 crore per district, which is additional to the expenditure of the state government. These initiatives contribute to a fairly complex institutional set-up of primary education sector in West Bengal.

## **2.2 Institutional Framework**

### **2.2.1 The Formal System of Primary Education<sup>6</sup>**

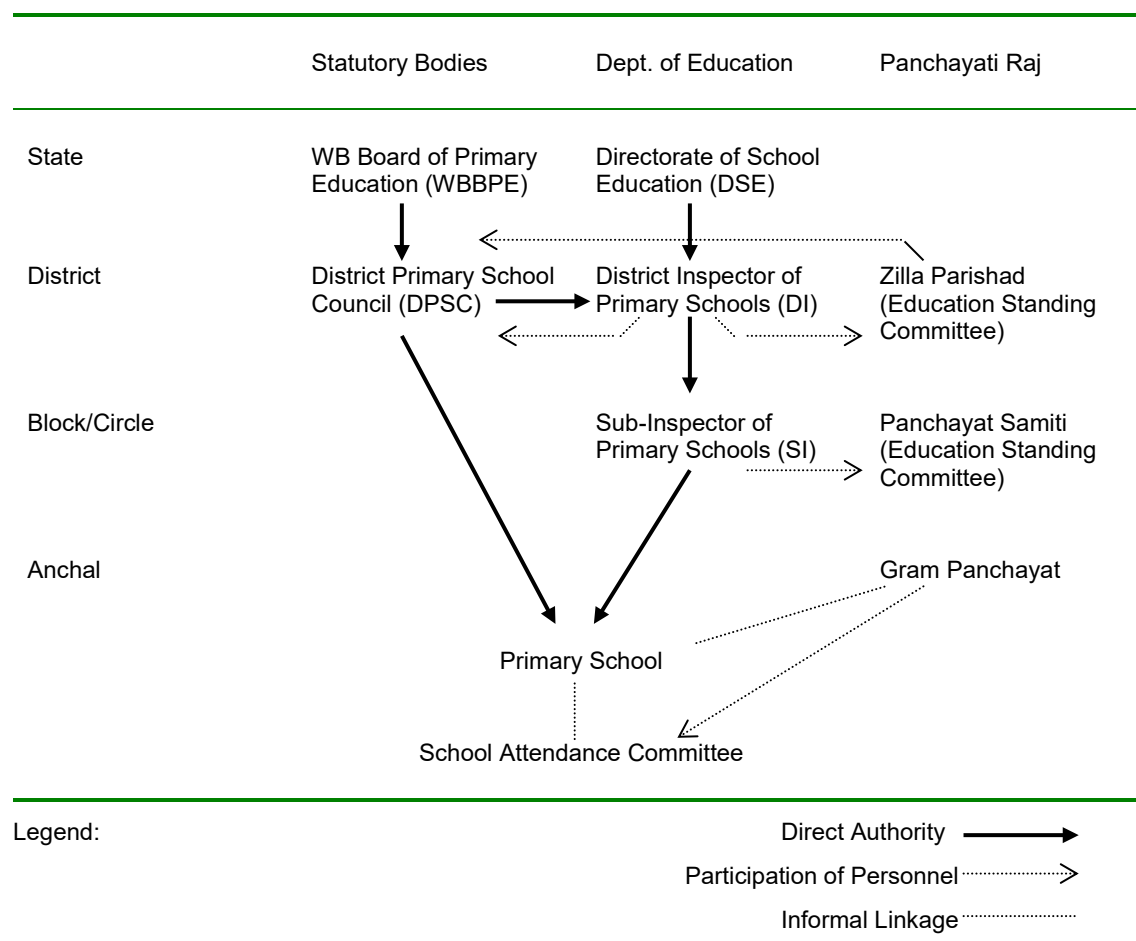
The formal system of primary education is dominated by “statutory bodies” that came into existence in the early 1990s based on the Primary Education Act of 1973 (which replaced an act dating back to 1930). The statutory bodies seem to be a speciality of West Bengal. Figure 1 shows the various institutions involved in the formal primary education system in West Bengal at various levels, and indicates the powerful position of the statutory bodies. By contrast, the power of the panchayats is relatively weak, except for decisions in regard to physical school infrastructure.

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<sup>5</sup> Roy, A., Kamaiah, B. and Rao, M.G. (2000) Educational Expenditure of Large States: A Normative View. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 35 (17), 1465-1469.

<sup>6</sup> This subsection draws heavily on an unpublished report to DFID by P.G. Vijaya Sherry Chand (January 1999) *Institutional Study: West Bengal District Primary Education Programme* (IIM Ahmedabad).

Figure 1: Formal System of Primary Education



Source: Modified from Chand (1999)

The *West Bengal Board of Primary Education* (WBBPE) and the *District Primary School Councils* (DPSC) were established under the provisions of the West Bengal Primary Education Act of 1973, which came into effect in 1990. A regularly constituted WBBPE would have 49 members, 20 appointed/nominated/ex-officio members and 29 elected members (two teachers of primary teacher training institutes, 14 primary schoolteachers, four councillors, three zilla parishad members and six MLAs).

However, the WBBPE came into existence in 1990 only. Moreover, elections for the WBBPE have not been held. Based on an amendment in the Primary Education Act, the state government annually appoints 25-30 members to this board. One reason for the delay in the constitution of a regular board as opposed to the ad hoc committee is that the definition of the electorate as far as the teaching community is concerned has been a contentious issue (Chand, 1999).

The WBBPE has the power to providing school syllabus, approving textbooks and controlling their production and distribution; instituting examinations; evolving regulations for the mode of teaching and the medium of instruction; controlling DPSCs; etc. In brief, the WBBPE has wide-ranging powers in matters of primary education management as provided in the Act of 1973.



The *District Primary School Councils* (DPSCs) evolved parallel to the WBBPE. At present, the councils are still ad hoc committees. The state government nominates the ca. 15-20 members and the chairperson of the council. The posts are honorary. All teachers' unions are represented with one or two members each. The chairperson of the zilla parishad education standing committee is ex-officio member of the DPSC. The District Inspector (Primary Schools) is also ex-officio member and secretary of the DPSC. The council has sub-committees on teacher recruitment, salary payments, pensions, transfers, etc. It meets about six times a year.

A regularly constituted DPSC would have a government-appointed chairperson; six nominated persons; three ex-officio members; and elected members (minimum three panchayat samiti members per sub-division, three municipal councillors, three zilla parishad members, one teacher instructor, three schoolteachers from each sub-division; maximum six MLAs and a staff member of DPSC).

The DPSC is the most important authority at the district level. It is the appointing authority for all teachers of the state-financed primary schools. The council controls service-related matters such as transfers and pensions. The DPSC is responsible for supervising primary schools and for expanding primary education. The council prepares plans and schemes. It receives primary education funds directly from the state government. The DPSC undertakes construction, extension and repair of schools – either directly or through local bodies (panchayats, municipalities).

The West Bengal Primary Education Act of 1973 also provided for the establishment of statutory village-level Welfare Committees comprising the head teacher, one assistant teacher elected by the teachers, four guardians elected by the parents of school-going children, one person nominated by the DPSC and one person elected by the gram panchayat. These committees were supposed to play a role in awareness generation, resource mobilisation, school supervision, etc.

However, welfare committees were not set up but *school-level committees* that have a long history continued to function in some places. Parents, teachers, educated and interested villagers, the local gram panchayat member and the SI are members of these advisory/attendance/monitoring committees. The school attendance committee sign teacher and student attendance sheets. They have no other formal role. However, the committee may play an informal role in motivating guardians and checking on teachers. The actual composition of the school committees seems to be local specific – so is their level of activity.

The statutory bodies were designed in a period when the panchayat system was practically non-existent. They were meant to become democratically elected institutions. Some interviewees argued that they signalled an early attempt for decentralised educational planning (WB 201). Others<sup>7</sup> argued that the DPSC structure now stands in the way for the panchayats to play a more significant role in primary education. The DPSCs remained nominated bodies dominated by teachers' associations and departmental officials. They would therefore not be able to represent the needs and aspirations of the community (or the communities).

In the districts, the education bureaucracy works under the control of the statutory bodies. The *Directorate of School Education* (DSE) historically had the responsibility

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<sup>7</sup> Unpublished paper that is not for quotation presented at CSSS workshop in July 2000 in Calcutta by Raghavendra Chattopadhyay, IIM Calcutta.

for implementing educational policies. Now, the main duty of DSE is to administer the finances earmarked for education, production and distribution of textbooks. It also looks after the midday-meal scheme and other incentive schemes.

At the district and circle level, the personnel of DSE plays a crucial role in inspecting school infrastructure and teachers, preparing teacher salaries, processing applications for teacher pensions, etc. Each district has one *District Inspector of Schools (Primary Education)* (DI) and some Assistant Inspectors of Schools (Primary Education) (AI). At the school-circle level (sometimes circles are congruent with blocks, sometimes blocks are split in two circles), the *Sub-Inspectors of Schools (Primary Education)* (SI) are in charge of supervises 60-110 primary schools.

The *State Council of Educational Research and Training* (SCERT) has functioned under the Department of Education since 1983. It focuses on teacher training, in-service training of supervisory/inspecting officers, etc. It has no autonomous status as the national NCERT.

The formal role of the *panchayats* in the provision and management of primary education in formal schools has not been significant. The chairperson of the *zilla parishad Education Standing Committee* is member of the DPSC ad hoc committee. But the role of the zilla parishad has been largely confined to providing physical school infrastructure (construction and repair of buildings, school grounds, etc.) under various centrally sponsored development programmes, including EAS. The sabhapatis are member of the zilla parishad Education Standing Committee. In this function, they channel demands for physical school infrastructure upward. The panchayat samiti Education Standing Committee and the gram panchayats also assist in distributing textbooks, the midday meal, etc.

In some districts, the elected ward representative to the gram panchayat is ex-officio chairperson of the *School Attendance Committee*. Generally, the panchayats are expected to play a bigger role in raising people's awareness in regard to education, identifying households with non-school-going children and encouraging guardians and children to enrol in, and attend, primary schools.

The panchayats play a far bigger role for providing alternative schooling, such as under the Shishu Shikkha Kendra (SSK, Child Education Centres), and for running social education programmes, including the Total Literacy Campaign and its follow-ups, the Post-Literacy Campaign and the Continued Education Campaign.

Also, the development administration, as organized in district collectorate and block offices, has no significant role in regard to primary education. For example, the block-level (Lady) Extension Officer Social Education (EOSE/LEOSE), who are under the Department of Mass Education, have moved into a less important role when the government introduced the position of Sub-Inspector of Schools in the 1970s. Now, they play almost no role in regard to primary schools – except for assisting the distribution of books. The EOSE/LEOSE look after programmes such as ICDS, SSK, TLC and organise cultural functions. The EOSE is also convenor of the *Panchayat Samiti Standing Committee Education*. According to rules, the committee should meet six times per year, but when need arises, they meet up to 10 times.

### 2.2.2 Alternative Primary Education

In 1997, the GoWB launched its alternative-primary-education programme, the Shishu Shikha Kendra (SSK) or Child Education Centres. The objective of the SSK is

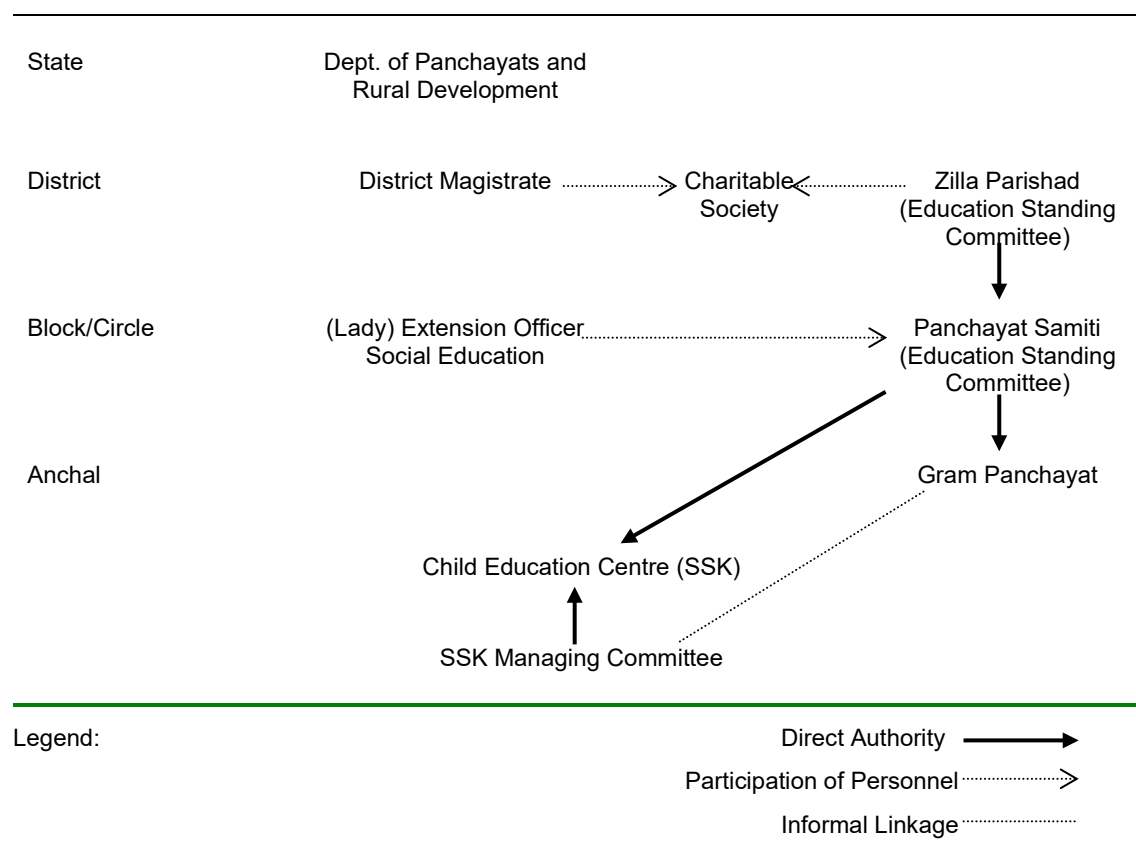
to complement the formal system of primary education in a cost-effective manner. An SSK can be opened where there is no primary school within one km, and/or where there is sufficient demand for alternative school timings.

The SSKs teach children from class I-III and at the pre-primary level. Women teachers aged older than 40 years, who do not qualify for recruitment in formal primary schools, are employed at significantly lower wages than ordinary schoolteachers have. The special feature of these learning centres is that the *Managing Committee*, comprising seven guardians and two educated locals, hires and fires teachers who are on one-year contracts. The Managing Committee also controls the annual contingency fund of Rs. 1,000.

As the EAS, the SSK is supposed to be demand-led. Villagers can express their demand for an alternative schooling centre in the gram sansad and by a petition. The gram panchayat is supposed to forward these petitions to the panchayat samiti and zilla parishad. In practice, however, the panchayats continue to regard the SSK as a target-oriented scheme with fixed numbers of sanctioned centres sanctioned. It seems that the gram panchayat and panchayat samiti make pre-selections, and the zilla parishad final decisions regarding the location of new SSK centres.

The SSK runs under the administrative supervision of the Department of Panchayats and Rural Development. At the district level, a registered charitable society that includes the DM and zilla parishad members is in charge of the programme. At the block level, the (Lady) Extension Officer Social Education, employees of the Dept. of Mass Education posted in the Block Office, administer the programme.

Figure 2: Alternative System of Primary Education



### 2.2.3 District Primary Education Programme

DPEP intends to assist the formal primary school system for a period of seven years in a comprehensive way. Recently, DPEP also started to support the alternative primary schooling system. In West Bengal, the programme is funded by DFID. It runs in 10 districts, including Malda where it effectively started end of 1999 (and could therefore not be studied on the ground). The main objectives of the DPEP are: (1) ensuring universal enrolment; (2) ensuring universal retention for four years; and (3) improving the quality of teaching.

In order to ensure access and enrolment, DPEP aims to (i) provide accommodation for the increasing child population; (ii) ensure community mobilisation for generation of awareness for enrolling children; (iii) provide alternative schooling where new primary schools cannot be provided or where there are physical, economic and social inconveniences to accommodate all children of the area in one school; (iv) to empower village education committees (VECs); etc. In order to improve retention DPEP has the objective to (i) build and reinforce teachers' capacity to take additional children; (ii) motivate teachers to have positive attitudes; (iii) improve teachers' capacity to introduce child-centric, activity-based, self-promoting teaching/learning processes; (iv) activate VECs to check probable dropout; (v) improve school environment; (vi) motivate parents to send children to school at least to class IV; etc. (DPEP Perspective Plan Malda, 1999).

DPEP put emphasis on comprehensive district-level planning based on accurate information gathered in an educational survey of schools and households (WB 201). DPEP spends 70% of the Rs. 40 crore fund per district on "software", such as teacher training, training for the village education committee members, training for village construction committee members (WB 202).

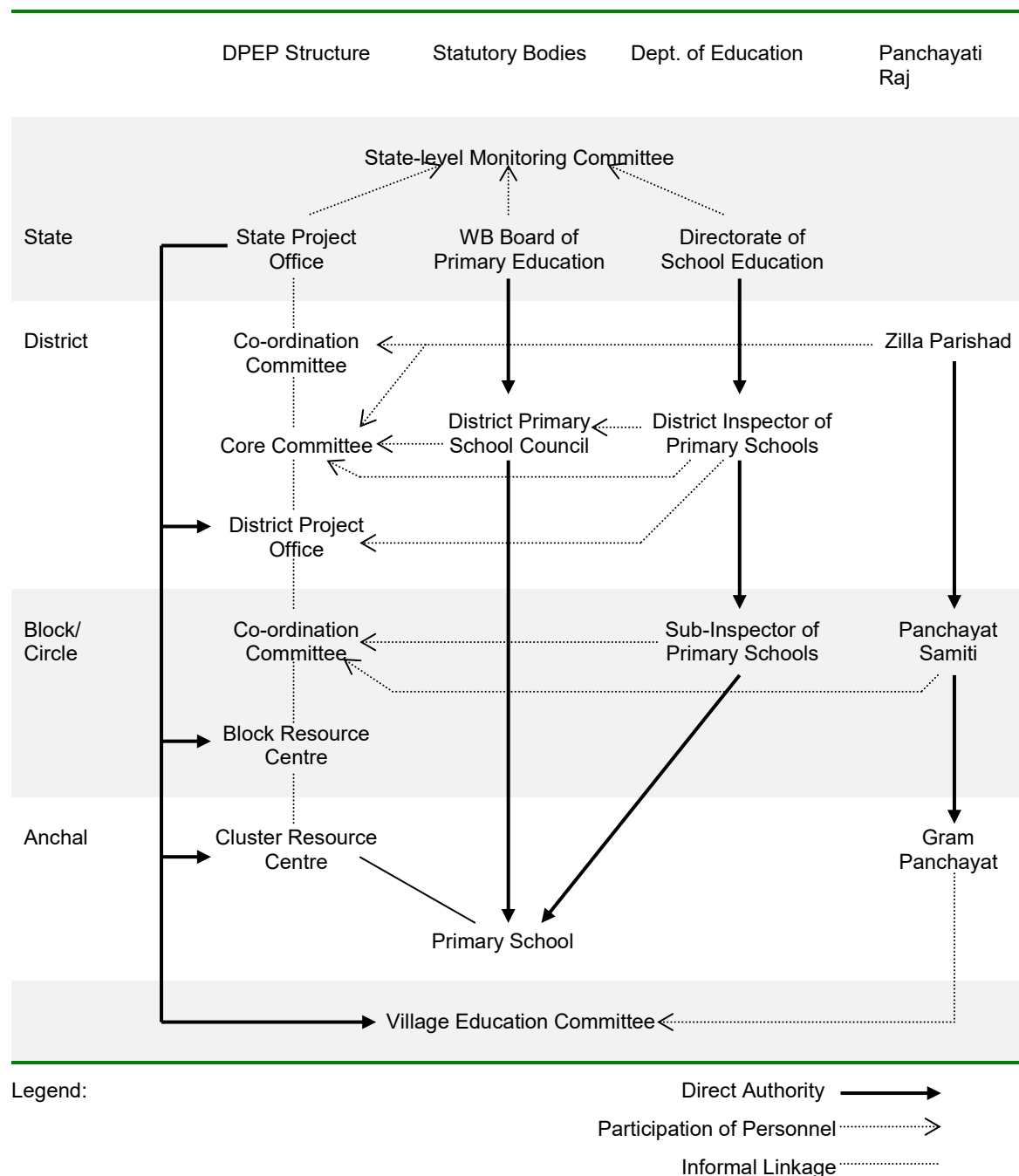
DPEP relies heavily on VECs, comprised of guardians and the local gram panchayat member as chairperson. VECs became functional by mid-1996. They are constituted along gram sansad lines as opposed to schools. The VECs play a major role in collecting data for the educational survey, generating awareness, mobilising resources and distributing educational material. They also manage annual grants of Rs. 500 for teaching-learning materials and of Rs. 1,000 for their development.

DPEP is administered by a State Project Office and by District Project Offices (DPO). The DPOs were set up in 1994. Since 1998, they have one person in the rank of DI as full-time staff. (Previously, the DI was ex-officio District Project Officer.) District-level Co-ordinating Committees (DLCC) are the policy and planning bodies. The DLCC is a 24-member committee with the Sabhadhipati as chairperson. The District Core Committee (DCC) with seven members looks after the day-to-day work of the DLCC. It is the actual implementing agency of DPEP. Before 1999, the DPSC chairperson was head of this body; now it is the Sabhadhipati. There is also a co-ordination committee at the block level includes the Sabhapati, BDO and SI.

Block Resource Centres (BRC) are responsible for teacher training and motivation. Anchal-level Cluster Resource Centres (CRC) are supposed to facilitate teacher training and provide a forum for teacher interaction.

DPEP's institutional framework is quite complex. In order to avoid building up a parallel system of primary education, DPEP is integrated with institutions of the formal primary school system and the panchayats (see figure 3).

Figure 3: Institutional Framework of DPEP in West Bengal



Source: Chand (1999)

### 2.3 Conclusions: Politics of “Adding” versus “Reforming”?

This section looked at the “supply” of primary education in West Bengal in a relatively static manner. Section 3 will bring the “demand” side into the picture, and section 4 will introduce a more dynamic view of processes and politics that shape the primary-education system. Section 4 will therefore also be more open to interpretation than this section. At this point, however, a few comments are made that will be further elaborated later.

The primary-education system in West Bengal is complex. Indeed, different systems coexist with different departments playing a role. This may indicate that the formal system has evaded radical reform so far. Rather, new schemes have been added.

Most striking is that the issue of primary education has not been devolved to the panchayats (as the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment? and the West Bengal’s Panchayat Act? dictate?). Rather, nominated politicised bodies dominate the formal system. The powerful DPSC Chairpersons are nominated by the state government. Furthermore, these councils represent the “needs” of the (well-unionised) teachers rather than the educational needs of the community. This will also not change once the councils are not ad hoc but elected (true?). The current system of education seems to run in order to provide jobs (to those with political connections) rather than serve educational goals.

Unlike in the case of land reform, there seems to be lack of political will to radically overhaul the system of primary education in West Bengal. This may not only because Marxist ideology puts more stress on material conditions than on the “superstructure”. Rather, the devolution of primary education to the panchayats would put vested interests of an important and well-nurtured ally of the Left Front – i.e., the teachers – at stake. Creating a parallel system of alternative schools is not only a cost-effective way to improve education but also politically better feasible than reforming the formal system.

Given the shortage of resources, it is not surprising that school infrastructure generally is insufficient. However, the more crucial factor of school quality seems to be the sincerity, commitment and motivation of teachers. Section 4 will argue that such commitment remains dependent on individual attitudes. Institutions of recruiting and monitoring teachers and organisations such as teacher unions seem to do little to improve teacher motivation. In many cases, private tuition becomes a necessity. In practice, therefore, primary *education* (as opposed to access to primary schools) is not free (even when considerations of alternative uses of children’s time are left out of the calculation).

## 3 Going to School: Parents and Children

### 3.1 Literacy Rates

#### *3.1.1 The Macro Picture*

Table 8 shows the literacy rate of 17 major states. West Bengal's literacy rate is 10 percentage points above the national average and the state ranks quite well (fifth). The literacy rate increased 14 percentage points between 1991 and 1997 (national average 12 percentage points). The increase in literacy rate is mainly because of the Total Literacy Campaign that was carried out in the early 1990s and targeted mainly the adult population.

Table 8: Literacy Rates (age 7+) of 17 major States, 1997

	Person	Male	Female
Kerala	93	96	90
Himachal Pradesh	77	87	70
Assam	75	82	66
Maharashtra	74	84	63
West Bengal	72	81	63
Tamil Nadu	70	80	60
Gujarat	68	80	57
Punjab	67	72	62
Haryana	65	76	52
Jammu and Kashmir	59	71	48
Karnataka	58	66	50
Madhya Pradesh	56	70	41
Uttar Pradesh	56	69	41
Rajasthan	55	73	35
Andhra Pradesh	54	64	43
Orissa	51	64	38
Bihar	49	62	34
INDIA*	62	73	50

Source: National Sample Survey Organisation, 53rd Round, quoted in <http://www.education.nic.in/htmlweb/iamrstat.htm> (courtesy Institute of Applied Manpower Research).

Table 9 shows the inter-district variation of literacy in West Bengal. The gap between Midnapore and Malda district is very wide (33 percentage points). This gap may even have widened after the Total Literacy Campaign because the campaign was much more successful in Midnapore than in Malda.

Table 9: Literacy Rates (age 7+), districts in West Bengal 1991

	Persons	Male	Female
Calcutta	78	82	72
<b>Midnapore</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>57</b>
Howrah	68	76	58
N/24Parg	67	74	58
Hooghly	67	76	57
Burdwan	62	71	52
Darjeeling	59	67	48
S/24Parg	55	69	41
Nadia	53	60	44
Bankura	52	67	30
Birbhum	49	59	37
Coochbehar	46	57	33
Jalpaiguri	45	56	33
Purulia	43	62	23
Dinajpur	39	50	28
Murshidabad	38	46	30
<b>Malda</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>25</b>
West Bengal	58	68	47

Source: Census 1991.

### 3.1.2 The Local Picture

Table 10 shows the literacy rates in the studied Midnapore and Malda ward. As the macro picture would suggest, literacy rates are significantly higher in the Midnapore ward than in the Malda ward, that is by 20 percentage points. However, the Midnapore ward is below the district average (according to the 1991 census). This may be because of the unusually high proportion of scheduled tribes in the selected villages. The Malda ward is above the district average (according to the 1991 census), probably because the ward is not remote and has no significant Muslim population, which tends to have comparatively low literacy rates. Furthermore, eight years lie between our household census and the 1991 census. However, the Total Literacy Campaign has not had any effect on literacy levels in the Malda block. There were no adult-literacy centres here.



Table 10: Literacy rates (7+) in the Midnapore and Malda ward by gender, poverty and caste

	Midnapore Ward			Malda Ward		
	<i>All</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>All</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
Destitute Households	40%	55%	26%	26%	32%	19%
Poor Households	55%	69%	42%	42%	51%	32%
Non-Poor Households	79%	90%	66%	74%	82%	64%
Scheduled Tribe	52%	69%	34%	24%	33%	14%
Scheduled Caste	61%	74%	50%	60%	71%	48%
General Caste	85%	93%	76%	63%	65%	60%
All Households	68%	81%	54%	48%	56%	39%

Source: Household Census, 1999.

Despite the huge inter-district variation of 20 percentage points, disparities in regard to literacy between social and economic groups within the studied wards were more significant. The disparities are generally higher in Malda, except for the gender gap that is lower because of generally low literacy rates of both men and women. A tribal woman in Malda is 4.6 times less likely to be literate than a general caste Hindu man.

Table 11: Inequality in literacy rates (percentage points)

	Midnapore Ward	Malda Ward
Difference by Gender (Male-Female)	27	17
Difference by Poverty Level (Non-Poor-Destitute)	39	48
Difference by Caste (General Caste-ST)	33	39

Source: Household Census, 1999.

## 3.2 School Enrolment, Attendance and Private Tuition

### 3.2.1 The Macro Picture

Data on school enrolment and school attendance is more closely related to primary-education provision, the focus of the study, than literacy data that also reflects achievements in adult education. For the sustainable improvement of education, child education is crucial and the best indicator for future progress in literacy.

In West Bengal, 8.9 million children of the 10 million children at primary-schooling age were officially enrolled in primary schools in 1998 (Ministry of Human Resource Development). However, enrolment figures collected by the schools themselves are overestimated. For example, students who once enrolled in school and dropped out after a few months later, are often kept in the register for class I until they are 15 years old.

According to the more reliable NSSO data, the net attendance rate in primary schools (class I-V) in West Bengal was 66% in 1994-95 (see table 10) – 64% in rural areas and 75% in urban areas. 28% of the children in rural West Bengal attended class VI-VIII (29% of the boys and 27% of the girls) (NSSO 52<sup>nd</sup> Round). About 15-20% of children enrolled in primary schools do not attend school regularly, and about half drop out before completing primary education (DFID Press Communiqué, 30/9/99; source not mentioned).

Table 12: Net Attendance Ratio in General Education in 17 major States, 1994-95

	Class I-V Rural (All)	Class I-V Rural (Male)	Class I-V Rural (Female)	Class I-V (All)	Class VI-VIII (All)
Kerala	91	89	93	91	76
Himachal Pradesh	85	86	83	85	54
Maharashtra	85	88	81	85	55
Tamil Nadu	83	87	79	84	61
Punjab	80	84	76	81	59
Haryana	77	80	73	78	52
Gujarat	75	79	71	78	52
Assam	72	71	72	72	43
Karnataka	70	76	64	73	50
Andhra Pradesh	66	70	62	70	41
<b>West Bengal</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>33</b>
Jammu & Kashmir	62	73	51	67	53
Orissa	60	66	54	61	45
Madhya Pradesh	59	65	53	63	35
Uttar Pradesh	58	66	49	59	33
Rajasthan	51	66	35	55	35
<b>Bihar</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>33</b>
India	63	68	56	66	43

Source: National Sample Survey Organisation, 52<sup>rd</sup> Round, quoted in <http://www.education.nic.in/htmlweb/iamrstat.htm> (courtesy Institute of Applied Manpower Research).

West Bengal's performance in comparison with other states is worse in terms of school attendance than in terms of literacy. This casts serious doubts about the sustainability of West Bengal's recent achievements in literacy.

### 3.2.2 The local picture

Table 13 shows attendance figures in the studied ward in Midnapore and Malda. It is interesting that school attendance, unlike literacy, is more or less the same in the studied Midnapore and Malda wards. This may not reflect the situation of the districts as a whole. Both the school density and the number of schoolchildren per primary schools are higher in Midnapore district than in Malda district. This indicates that enrolment is generally higher in Midnapore district. The relatively low level of school

attendance in the studied Midnapore ward may be explained with the high proportion of tribal population. However, this questions the widely held perception that Midnapore is one of the best performers among West Bengal's rural districts in regard to education. With the current school attendance rates it is unlikely that the Midnapore ward will make substantial, sustainable progress in literacy.

Table 13: School attendance in the Midnapore and Malda ward by gender, poverty and caste

School attendance (age 7-12)	Midnapore Ward			Malda Ward		
	<i>All</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>All</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
Destitute Households	44%	63%	25%	53%	61%	43%
Poor Households	59%	68%	50%	63%	73%	54%
Non-Poor Households	83%	90%	74%	91%	87%	95%
Scheduled Tribe	51%	64%	37%	36%	48%	21%
Scheduled Caste	79%	100%	57%	83%	87%	80%
General Caste	81%	92%	83%	84%	86%	82%
All Households	68%	78%	56%	67%	72%	61%

Source: Household Census, 1999.

As opposed to inter-district variation, disparities within the studied wards are very substantial. Table 14 shows disparities in regard to gender, poverty and caste. Disparities between poor and non-poor as well as between tribal and non-tribal communities are very high. This points to economic constraints and to social (self?) exclusion for primary education (see below). Gender disparities are particular high among tribal communities (27 percentage points in both Midnapore and Malda ward). In the Malda ward, only 21% of tribal girls aged between seven and 12 years attend school. This will not be sufficient to significantly raise the extremely low literacy rate of 14% of tribal women there.

Table 14: Inequality in school attendance (percentage points)

	Midnapore Ward	Malda Ward
Difference by Gender (Male-Female)	22	11
Difference by Poverty Level (Destitute-Non-Poor)	39	38
Difference by Caste (ST-General Caste)	30	48

Source: Household Census, 1999.

School attendance seems to be more regular in the Malda ward than in the Midnapore ward (see table 15). However, our (unsystematic) observations contradict the data. We had the impression that many children in Malda go to school irregularly. In cases where both parents go outside in search of work in the increasingly non-agricultural, semi-urban economy, they may not be aware that their children actually do not go to

school. Furthermore, child labour seemed to be relatively widespread. In the agricultural economy in the Midnapore ward, by contrast, the jobs for the poor are primarily local. So, they are able to supervise whether their children actually go to school or not. Because of the problem of parents' unawareness of their children's actual practice, the reliability of the data provided in table 15 may be doubted.

Table 15: Regularity of school attendance in the Midnapore and Malda ward

	Midnapore Ward		Malda Ward	
	<i>Poor</i>	<i>Non-Poor</i>	<i>Poor</i>	<i>Non-Poor</i>
Regular	42%	20%	54%	73%
Some Absences	47%	73%	35%	18%
Significant Absences	11%	7%	8%	9%
N.A.	--	--	3%	--
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Village Questionnaire Survey, 1999.

Private tuition has become widespread in the studied areas for the past 5-10 years. Even among poor households, the majority of schoolchildren of class I-IV attend private tuition classes. In the Midnapore ward, there are 1-2 private tutors who teach at the primary level in each village. In the Malda ward, private tuition classes are held in village J and village K. The private tutors are local unemployed young persons. (We did not observe the once common practice of government teachers working as private tutors aside (see Pratichi Report on Education in West Bengal). This practice has recently been stopped by the Government of West Bengal.) Tuition at the primary level costs about Rs. 25 per month per child (or Rs. 300 per year) in Old Malda, and Rs. 30-35 in Debra (or Rs. 360-420 per year).

The reasons for taking private tuition classes are vary between Midnapore and Old Malda. In the Midnapore ward, private tuition complements the government-funded primary education. Parents, poor and non-poor, send their children to tuition classes because of increased ambitions and a high value attached to education. In Old Malda, by contrast, private tuition appears to be a substitute for the badly functioning government primary schools and low teaching quality (see Ch. 4.3.6).

### 3.3 Perceived Value of Education

Both the village questionnaire survey and group interviews indicate that interest in education among the poor is generally strong. The desire for education is generally lower among poor households, particularly for girls. Table 16 indicates that the desire for education is similarly high in the Midnapore and Malda ward. However, while nearly all in Midnapore want to have some level of education for their children, 14% and 20% of the poor in Malda have no desire for education for their boys and girls, respectively.

Table 16: Desire for education, Midnapore and Malda ward

	Midnapore Ward				Malda Ward			
	Poor		Non-Poor		Poor		Non-Poor	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Class X+	71%	25%	95%	80%	78%	53%	95%	75%
Class VII-IV	14%	19%	5%	15%	1%	6%	5%	10%
Class IV-VI	10%	48%	0%	5%	3%	14%	0%	10%
Class I-III	0%	4%	0%	0%	4%	6%	0%	5%
No desire for education	0%	1%	0%	0%	14%	20%	0%	0%
No concern	4%	4%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
N.A.	1%	-	-	-	1%	1%	-	-
Total	100%	101%	100%	100%	101%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Village Questionnaire Survey, 1999.

The desire for education varies quite strongly between different communities. Table 17 shows data for the communities that represent the biggest difference, the general-caste Hindus and the Bhumij (ST) in Midnapore and the Malpahariya (ST) in Malda.

Table 17: Desire for education by community, Midnapore and Malda ward (poor households)

	Midnapore Ward				Malda Ward			
	Bhumij (ST)*		General Caste**		Malpahariya (ST)***		General Caste****	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Class X+	57%	20%	90%	50%	62%	28%	100%	83%
Class VII-IV	23%	9%	0%	40%	3%	9%	0%	8%
Class IV-VI	17%	66%	0%	0%	0%	19%	0%	8%
Class I-III	0%	3%	0%	0%	9%	6%	0%	0%
No desire for education	0%	3%	0%	0%	22%	34%	0%	0%
No concern	0%	0%	10%	10%	0%	3%	0%	0%
N.A.	3%	-	-	-	3%	-	-	-
Total	100%	101%	100%	100%	99%	99%	100%	99%

\*N=35; \*\*N=10; \*\*\*N=32; \*\*\*\*N=12

Source: Village Questionnaire Survey, 1999.

Table 18 reveals what effects of education the poor value in particular. The perceived value of education has been classified into economic benefits, such as improved access to jobs, move away from manual labour, able to manage business; improvements related to empowerment and self respect, including increased self-dependence, better participation in society, avoidance of social embarrassment and cheating; improvements related to social respect, such as becoming able to give advice to others or to serve the public; and family-related advantages, including easier marriage or marriage into good family, ability to manage household, keep in touch with parents and assist own children's education.

Table 18: Perceived use of education, Midnapore and Malda ward (poor households)

	Midnapore Ward		Malda Ward	
	For Boys	For Girls	For Boys	For Girls
Economic Benefits	80%	11%	76%	45%
Empowerment/Self-Respect	28%	21%	26%	20%
Social Respect	3%	0%	3%	0%
Family-Related Advantages	0%	78%	1%	30%
Reasons against Education (Family-Related)	0%	8%	0%	9%
Reasons against Education (Other)	0%	0%	15%	16%
N.A.	4%	1%	4%	4%
Total*	115%	119%	125%	124%

\*Maximum two reasons were given.

Source: Village Questionnaire Survey, 1999

Poor villagers value education mainly because it may lead to economic benefit, such as increasing the chance to get a job. Many are aware of the reservation policy for government jobs. Indeed, in the Midnapore village, one or two children from poor ST households became government officers and now play a motivating role for others.

However, the poor are realistic about the chances of their children getting a permanent (service) job:

The prospect of unemployment hampers the interest in secondary and higher education here. As we are poor, we cannot afford to pay the bribes that are necessary to get a job. (Ma V207)

Nevertheless, (elementary) education is valued as it makes children able to run a business, to move into vocations that require literacy and numeracy skills (e.g., mechanics, carpenters), to look for work outside, and to bargain in the market:

A person who has “outside knowledge” has a good chance to find some job, for example, helping out in a shop, doing accounts, etc. We should be able to get some “return” from the education of our children. (Ma V209)

Villagers realise that with economic change, that is, the gradual shift away from agriculture, there is more need for literacy. This process is more advanced in the Malda ward than in the Midnapore ward:

Earlier, there was just agriculture. Now, there are different kinds of works. For these jobs, one has to go outside and to be literate is more important. Literate people can not be cheated so easily while we illiterate people are cheated in every sphere of life. (Ma V210)

Apart from economic factors, villagers are aware that they live in an increasingly text-based society that goes beyond the village boundaries and in which education has become necessary for being self-dependent and for avoiding embarrassment and cheating:

Our children will be able to mingle with children of more educated classes. They will be less isolated. They will be more aware and have more general knowledge. This will enable them to give their parents advice. They will also be able to write [official] letters. (Ma V206)

The present age is the age of literacy and education. Being educated, one can achieve self-confidence and [better] mentality. [One can] build up towards better understanding for one’s own betterment. (Mi V210)

An educated person is less dependent on others. “The boy” can help his parents with paperwork such as looking after land records, measurements, etc. He also can teach the next generation. (Ma V208)

An educated person cannot be cheated so easily. Being able to write and read also means that the person can maintain certificates and deal with offices. This will be of use for the whole family. (Ma V209)

Avoiding social embarrassment through education was important in the more literate Midnapore village where there is a relatively strong “culture of education”. In the Malda village, on the other hand, (illiterate) parents valued education more for reducing the scope of being cheated by others.

Table 16 shows that girls’ education is often valued for different reasons than boy’s education. Particularly in the Midnapore village, girl’s education is valued mainly for perceived family- and marriage-related benefits rather than economic ones. In the agricultural economy of the Midnapore ward, women rarely go outside for work. They look after the household, the cattle and engage in seasonal work in the nearby paddy fields. Parents of poor families see an “optimal” level of education for girls at class IV-VI. Some education makes it easier to find a suitable husband of a good family and reduces the dowry price. However, if the daughter is educated beyond a certain level, dowry prices will go up too.

Education for girls is needed for marriage purpose only. Education up to class VI to VII is sufficient. We do not want higher education, because we can’t afford it. The girls won’t get a job anyway, so higher education is useless. (Mi V206)

Apart from marriage-related reasons, developing the ability of girls to teach their own children (and thus reduce education costs for tuition) was an important reason why girls’ education up to a certain level was valued. Girls’ education is also welcome, as it will enable the daughter to write letters and keep in touch with her parents when she settles in her husband’s home.

Gender bias in desired level of education and values attached to education is less in the Malda ward than in the Midnapore ward. Here, both men and women go outside for work, either commuting to the nearby town or migrating seasonally. In some cases, women have to manage on their own for two or three months when their men migrate. Education is therefore perceived important for both men and women.

Table 21 reflects the villagers’ perception of the realised benefit from their own education. Despite lack of data in Midnapore (the research assistants forgot to ask this question in many cases), the survey points to significantly higher economic benefits from education for the non-poor. Of course, there may be a few cases where a formerly poor household was able to lift itself above the poverty line because of education. However, table 21 indicates that returns from education tend to be smaller for the poor than for the non-poor. The poor may lack connections necessary to secure a permanent (government) job and/or the necessary capital to start a business.

Table 21: Realised use/value of education, Midnapore and Malda ward

	Midnapore Ward		Malda Ward	
	Poor (N=55)	Non-Poor (N=19)	Poor (N=30)	Non-Poor (N=18)
Economic Benefits	25%	79%	33%	67%
Empowerment/Self-Respect	22%	16%	43%	27%
Social Respect	0%	0%	3%	0%
Family-Related Advantages	5%	0%	20%	27%
No Benefit	11%	5%	17%	0%
N.A.	40%	16%	3%	0%
Total*	113%	119%	125%	124%

\*Maximum two reasons were given.

Source: Village Questionnaire Survey, 1999

### 3.4 Economic and Social Constraints

Apart from lower economic returns that the poor can expect from education, poverty makes it difficult for the households to meet the costs and achieve the desired level of education for their children. Table 19 shows that the majority of the poor are not sure whether they will be able to support their children's education up to the desired level. They mentioned their economic condition as the main determinant (see village questionnaire survey, Analysis 2c, "constraints", page 6, table 5).

Table 19: Ability to support desired level of education, Midnapore and Malda ward

	Midnapore Ward		Malda Ward	
	Poor	Non-Poor	Poor	Non-Poor
Desired level can be achieved	26%	70%	13%	65%
Not sure	53%	30%	56%	30%
Desired level cannot be achieved	19%	0%	16%	5%
(No desire for education)	--	--	14%	--
N.A.	3%	--	1%	--
Total*	101%	100%	100%	124%

Source: Village Questionnaire Survey, 1999.

The poor also mentioned their poverty as the main reason for not sending children to school (regularly). In the village questionnaire, 28% of the poor parents with non-attending children at school age, and 57% in Malda, quoted economic constraints.

The most important economic constraint is that in many cases both parents have to go outside for work. Therefore, children often have to look after the household, their younger brothers and sisters and livestock. This prevents them from going to (primary) school (regularly) (Mi V207, Mi V209, Mi V211, Ma V211).

Absence of parents due to economic compulsions has additional negative consequences for children's education. The parents are not able to supervise the children. Like anywhere else in the world, children are not always motivated to go to



school. Parents who have to go outside for work cannot make sure that the children go to school and will not just go playing with their friends (Mi V206, Mi V208, Mi V209, Mi V211, Ma V208).

Parents are also reluctant to send children with an empty stomach or inadequate clothing (particularly in winter) to school.

In the Malda ward, child labour (other than domestic) is another important economic reason for not attending schools. More than in Midnapore, there is high demand for boys helping out in roadside restaurant and for girls working as maidservants in nearby houses of BSF employees. A nine-year old boy who dropped out at class I explained to us:

I stopped going to school because the teachers were always asleep. So, I thought that I will not learn anything there. Now, I work as a cow herder. I'm able to earn Rs. 100 per month for my parents and get food and clothes for free. (Ma V211)

This quote points to two other issues: (1) the quality of teaching influences the choice for or against education, and (2) decision-making regarding education is not only done by parents but also by children. Indirectly, the low quality of teaching in the Malda primary schools has raised the costs for (primary) education. Although primary education is theoretically free, parents, including the poor, feel compelled to send their children to private tuition that costs Rs. 25-30 per month for a child at the primary level. These costs are real disincentives for sending children to school:

If you can't afford the tuition, what is the use of sending your children to school when they do not learn anything there. In this case, it's better for them to stay at home and help their parents. (Ma V207)

Particularly if parents are often absent and not able to provide guidance, children make the actual decision whether to continue school or not. In the Midnapore ward, for example, 26% of the questionnaire respondents whose children do not go to school mentioned that this is because of the disinterest of the child. This problem is aggravated by irregular attendance. The child becomes frightened not to be able to answer the teacher's questions properly, which may cause teacher's anger. Eventually, the child drops out (Mi V211).

Economic constraints often bring about very conscious household decisions regarding "investments" in education. Many poor households decide to educate only some of the children. Sometimes, the intellectual ability of the children is taken into account and the brightest child is sent to school. Often, the elder children have to stay at home and look after their younger siblings. And most commonly, a strong gender bias against girls is at work when it comes to deciding who has to be excluded from education. The benefit of, or return from, a daughter's education is regarded lower than that of sons, because daughters will be married off and eventually settle with their husbands. In addition, girls aged 10 to 12 often face social restriction of going out for school (Mi V207, Ma V208).

Economic hardship aggravates the inherent gender bias. In the Midnapore ward, for example, destitute families send their boys (age 7-12) only marginally less to school than poor families (63% versus 68%). The "savings" are made with excluding girls from education. While 50% of the girls from poor households can go to school, only 25% of the girls of destitute families are sent to school (see table 13).

Gender discrimination is not the only social factor that influences the household-level "cost-benefit calculation". Table 16 shows that desire for education is slightly higher

in the Midnapore ward than in the Malda ward, where 14-20% of the poor are not interested in sending their children to school. Some poor households in Midnapore reported that they would be willing to starve or to beg if this is necessary to ensure their children's education. They are ready to pay a high price for education. However, Midnapore's "culture of education" has not lead to higher school-attendance rates.

There is a strong overlap between poverty level and caste. Villagers tend to regard economic factors as the main determinant whether a family sends their children to school or not. Caste/community is treated as a dependant variable:

The Santhals are generally more interested in education than the Malpahariya. This is because the Santhals are a little bit less poor. Most of them have a small piece of inherited land. By contrast, the Malpahariya ancestors were not able to hold on to their land. (Ma V205)

However, table 17 indicates that poor general-caste Hindus have a more pronounced desire for education than poor tribal households. Indeed, school-attendance rates of poor general-caste children tend to be better than those of non-poor tribal children. A poor general-caste Hindu explained to us:

I shall try hard [to provide education for my children], because, as we are higher caste, education is expected from us. So I have to try. (Mi Q-57)

Tribal communities, by contrast, do not feel similar expectations. Historically, they have not been included in mainstream education and may therefore find it difficult to assess its benefits. Also, tribal (e.g., the Santhals in Malda) may face language problems:

The villagers speak Santhali at home. Many Santhal children drop out because teachers teach only in Bengali. The children feel embarrassed when they do not understand. Therefore, one should appoint a tribal teacher here. (Ma V202)

However, we found no evidence that tribal communities try to resist formal primary education that could be seen as part of mainstream culture, alien to their own culture.

As it has been entrenched practice not to send children to school, some parents may not even think about possible benefits of education (see box 1). There are cases where social practice substitutes for individual (household) decision and cost-benefit calculation.

Box 1: Different values attached to education or stagnant attitudes?

A&B have five children, two girls aged 11 and five, and three boys aged nine, six and 2½. The oldest girl and the boy who are in schooling age have never gone to school. The six-year-old boy and the five-year-old girl go to "chatu" school (ICDS, named after the food (ground chickpeas) that is given to the children there). A&B are very poor and both work as casual labourers. But two incomes are hardly sufficient for such a large family.

Therefore, A does not send his older children to school. That would cost him too much. "They must wear proper dresses. I can't send them naked. School-going children also need better food because they have to study. And then, I had to buy notebooks, etc... Rice [under the midday-meal programme] is distributed only once per year and is insufficient. In any case, if children do not go to school but work in a dhaba or as a maid, they get food from their employer. They can also catch fish, etc."

However, A's brother interfered and questioned A's explanations. The brother thinks that he is not less poor than A and that A just looks for excuses. He forces his children to attend school even with an empty stomach because he is very much interested in their education. Indeed, the brother tried to convince A several times to send his children to school. He told A about the benefits of education.

We encouraged A to respond to his brother's criticism. However, he remained silent. We did not have the impression that A was embarrassed. Rather, he did not know what to say. He did not seem to have weighted the costs of education (of which he is well aware) against the potential benefits (of which he seemed less aware). A did not seem to make a conscious cost-benefit analysis. Sending children for work seems to be an unquestioned common practice. However, as A's brother illustrates, the practice of not sending children to school becomes increasingly questioned.

Table 20: School attendance by literacy of adult household members, Midnapore and Malda ward (poor households)

	Midnapore Ward			Malda Ward		
	<i>Illiterate</i>	<i>Neolit., Class I-III</i>	<i>Class IV+</i>	<i>Illiterate</i>	<i>Neolit., Class I-III</i>	<i>Class IV+</i>
All children attend school	19%	30%	53%	27%	44%	79%
Some children attend school	38%	37%	7%	27%	56%	7%
No children attend school	44%	33%	40%	47%	--	14%
Total	101%	100%	100%	101%	100%	100%

Source: Village Questionnaire Survey, 1999.

It is likely that parents with some degree of education are more aware of the potential benefits of education and therefore more likely to send their children to school. Table 20 seems to confirm this hypothesis in the case of Malda but not very conclusively in the case of Midnapore, where the Total Literacy Campaign is believed to have had a greater impact.

### 3.5 Accessing Schools

School attendance also depends on availability of schools in the particular area. Generally, there is a fairly good availability of primary schools in both studied wards in Midnapore and Malda: there are two primary schools in, or in the vicinity of, each the studied wards, and children do not need to go further than 1.5 kilometre to reach their school, except for a small group of households in the tribal hamlet N in Old Malda who are 2.5 kilometres away from any school (see 4.1). Nevertheless, access to schools can be problematic. In Old Malda, it is often difficult to reach the schools in the rainy season, because they are not connected to all-weather roads. Furthermore, administrative bottlenecks hindered easy access to schooling (see 3.5.1) and the distribution of children to particular schools showed a social pattern in Old Malda (see 3.5.2).

#### 3.5.1 Administrative Obstacles

In the studied Malda ward, some parents reported difficulties in admitting their children, who are supposed to be registered between the months of May and July if they are between five and seven years of age, to primary school (see Ma V209). Most common obstacle was the lack of a birth certificate, a document that poor people in rural West Bengal rarely possess. Members of the school committee hand out registration forms only to those who can present a birth certificate stating the age of

the pupil. Arranging a birth certificate when the child reaches in schooling age costs around Rs. 150-200. (The registration period, by contrast, suited the migrating population fairly well as they were absent in October and November.)

While some teachers make exceptions and admit pupils without birth certificate or a substitute document from the *pradhan* confirming residence and age of the child, administrative difficulties deterred 3% of the sample households to send their children to school. First, it can be a hassle to get the certificate from the *pradhan*: Villagers reported that they are often not immediately served by the *gram panchayat* staff and asked to come back in a few times. This discourages especially the poorest who have little time to spend in *panchayat* offices. Second, the current *de facto pradhan* is unaware that his wife would have the authority to certify residence and age of children, which would be sufficient for admission. Third, the headmaster-in-charge of Ma-PS-2 and the school secretary of Ma-PS-1 have the misconception that only the birth certificate (and no substitute certificate from the *pradhan*) officially entitles children to admission to government primary schools.

In most cases, these difficulties are sorted out eventually. The headmaster of Ma-PS-2, for example, admitted that he allowed children in without birth certificate “on request of a respectable person” (Ma T202). Neighbourhood leaders have lobbied for children to be admitted to school and entered in the school register without any official documentation. For example, Arun Mal has worked on the teachers of Ma-PS-1, so that tribal children from his *para* are admitted without questioning (see Ma V205). However, the admission difficulties and the need for lobbying means that the right to education is not guaranteed. School admission has become something the poor have to fight for.

### 3.5.2 A Social Geography of Primary Schools

In the studied Midnapore ward, the location of the households determines which primary school the children attend. Children go to the school that is nearest by regardless of their social or economic status. (In a neighbouring ward, some children attended an SSK outside, although a primary school was located in their hamlet.) The situation in Old Malda is different. Many children from non-poor general-caste households do not go to the two local primary schools but to schools that have a better reputation, which leads to a caste/class-based segregation of schools (see table 21) and eventually to school-specific effectiveness of grassroots pressure (see ch. 4). Also, the parents of the tribal hamlet N send their children to missionary boarding schools elsewhere in the district.

Table 21: Schoolchildren by school and by caste, Old Malda

	<i>SC Pupils</i>	<i>ST Pupils</i>	<i>General Caste Pupils</i>
Local primary school Ma-PS-1	89	11	2
Local primary school Ma-PS-2	86	32	0
Primary school in nearby GP	19	4	105

Source: School Registers, 1999.

Primary schools run from 9am to 1pm, but the primary school in village J (Ma-PS-1) introduced morning schooling hours from 6:30-10:30am in order to better accommodate children from working parents. The idea is that elder children (girls) could take over from their mothers and look after their siblings from mid-morning onwards. Also, children's work as cow herders or maid servants could be better accommodated with earlier hours (Ma T201). However, some parents reported that they would prefer the normal school hours

### **3.6 Possible Interpretations**

Household decisions regarding education are very complex. First, the decision-maker may not always be the parent(s). Children sometimes decide more or less on their own whether to go to school or not. This decision may be made without the knowledge of the parents, particularly in cases where they are unable to supervise the children. The economic context of the Malda ward (importance of non-agricultural activities, work outside the village and migration, location near the town) favours such a situation more than the context of Midnapore.

Second, the household cost-benefit calculation for education is complex. Both economic and social factors influence household decision-making. The fairly high costs for primary education (as a consequence of necessary private tuition and lost income from child labour) is prohibitive for poor households. This factor probably plays a more important role in the Malda ward where private tuition is an absolute must if children are to learn something. The fact that elder sisters (and less frequently elder brothers) are supposed to look after their siblings is another prohibitive factor. This leads to a strong gender bias, particularly in poor households where both husband and wife are compelled to go for work outside.

Furthermore, the economic returns from education seem to be lower for the poor as they lack connections and resources to put their education to use in an economic sense (e.g., secure a government job or start a business). Social factors also influence people's calculation of expected returns from education. In some cases, it is even inappropriate to talk of cost-benefit "calculations" as parents rather follow social practices of not sending their children to school. Tribal households tend to be reluctant to send their children, particularly the girls, to school.

This leads to the discussion of "awareness" vs. "economics". This research is not able to give a conclusive answer which of the two is more important for determining decisions regarding education. In Midnapore, levels of "awareness" seem to be higher, as a consequence of the influence of the Total Literacy Campaign and because non-tribal households encourage tribal households to send their children to school. However, school attendance rates (as perceived by the parents) are the same in Malda and Midnapore. In Malda, the level of poverty is certainly not lower than in Midnapore. However, because of the changing economic context with increasing importance of non-agricultural activities, stronger links to the nearby town and unchanged importance of migration, the economic value of education tends to be higher than in the only slowly changing rural, agricultural economy of the Midnapore ward. This is most clearly reflected in the value attached to the education of girls. In Malda, this value is mainly understood in terms of expected economic benefits. In Midnapore, it is primarily social, family-related considerations that encourage parents to send their daughters to school. Here, the "culture of education" may be as important

factor for sending children to school as expected economic returns. However, the “culture of education” is not strong enough to outdo economic constraints. Though the outcome in terms of schools attendance is the same in the Malda and Midnapore ward, the reasons for going to school are very different.

## 4 Providing Education: Teachers, Communities and the State

We have argued that the poor in Debra and Old Malda generally do not lack desire for elementary education. Yet the actual “demand” (i.e., school enrolment and attendance in primary and secondary schools) is much lower than the expressed desire for education (see Table 19) because poverty and livelihood patterns constrain the poor to have their children educated. However, actual demand for public schooling is also strongly influenced by the quality of education provided. Bad quality reduces benefits from education and, as in the case of Old Malda, can even make basic education very costly as private tuition becomes necessary. Therefore, demand and supply of education cannot be looked at in isolation: the supply (incl. quality) of education codetermines actual demand – and we suggest that this is more significant than the influence of demand on supply. While parents and children may “respond” directly to school quality, their demand or pressure on the education system is mediated and diluted through interrelations of a variety of actors, including teachers, teachers’ unions, education officials and policymakers. Desire for education, therefore, doesn’t translate directly into supply.

This section looks at the supply side of primary education in West Bengal that is determined by a number of factors, including infrastructure and school environment, the taught curriculum and applied pedagogy, as well as the quality of teaching and the teachers. Yet the role of villagers in education should not be assumed to be the one of mere “consumers” or “clients of services “delivered” by the state. Rather, villagers interact with the “providers” of education (teachers, education bureaucracy) in the “co-production” of education, perhaps most visibly in the field of monitoring teachers. In particular, this section discusses interactions between villagers, school attendance committees (SAC), government officers of the Department of Education, statutory boards, teacher unions and *panchayats* that together shape the “actually existing” primary-education system in West Bengal.

### 4.1 School Infrastructure

***Intro: Physical infrastructure: buildings, learning materials, school environment***

#### 4.1.1 The Macro Picture

West Bengal had 51,521 formal primary schools in 1998-99. There is at least one primary school within a radius of two kilometres for 97% of the villages ([www.westbengal.gov.in](http://www.westbengal.gov.in)). The number of alternative SSK is very small in comparison but rising at a faster pace. Table 2 gives an impression of the available school infrastructure in Midnapore and Malda district.

Table 22: School Infrastructure, Midnapore and Malda districts, 1998-99

	Midnapore District	Malda District	West Bengal
No. of Primary Schools	7,627	1,877	51,521
No. of Child Education Centres (SSK)	700	105	
Average no. of households per school*	190	258	243
Average no. of households per school (incl. SSK)	174	244	
Average no. of school-going children per school	208	187	173
No. of Primary Schoolteachers	18,072	6,019	
Average no. of teachers per primary school	2.4	3.2	
Teacher-Pupil Ratio	1:88	1:58	

\* No. of households per 1991 census. Thus, the school-household ratio is likely to be worse in reality.

Sources: DPEP School Survey, Malda; Midnapore District Profile.

Table 2 shows that there are more primary schools in Midnapore district than in Malda district. However, because of higher enrolment in Midnapore (see section 3), primary schools are more crowded in Midnapore than in Malda. Moreover, Malda is quantitatively better endowed with primary schoolteachers than Midnapore.

#### 4.1.2 The District Picture

Thanks to a DPEP educational survey, we have more detailed data on school infrastructure in Malda district. However, the condition in Midnapore may not be radically different.

A good school environment is crucial for effective learning. For example, the number of rooms per school is important as four classes have to be taught simultaneously. Table 3 shows that the physical infrastructure is far from satisfactory.

The quality of the buildings is also wanting. Only a bit more than half of the school buildings are pacca. As the district has been affected severely by floods, 430 schools need major repairs and 941 school buildings need minor repairs. Only 52% of the primary schools have drinking-water facilities, and only 13% of the schools have toilets (Perspective Plan of DPEP, Malda, 1999).



Table 23: Number of rooms in primary schools, Malda

Schools with no room/building	152 (8%)
Schools with one room	757 (40%)
Schools with two rooms	481 (26%)
Schools with three rooms	227 (12%)
Schools with four and more rooms	260 (14%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>1877 (100%)</b>

Source: Perspective Plan of DPEP, Malda (1999)

The quality of education also depends on the availability of teaching-learning material (TLM), such as blackboards, maps, charts and sport kits, and furniture. Most schools have teaching-learning materials and some benches, chairs and tables for the teachers. However, the use of TLM is not satisfactory as most teachers do not know how to use these materials (Perspective Plan of DPEP, Malda, 1999).

Table 24 gives an impression where the selected gram panchayats and blocks in Midnapore and Malda stand in relation to the district as a whole. Again, thanks to the DPEP educational survey in Malda, the data base is better there. The table suggests that the school infrastructure in the selected Midnapore gram panchayat is similar to the district average. The Malda gram panchayat, on the other hand, seems to be in a very favourable situation when compared with the district as a whole. This is possibly because the gram panchayat is near the town.

Table 24: School Infrastructure, Midnapore and Malda gram panchayats, 1998-99

	Midnapore District	Midnapore Block	Midnapore GP	Malda District	Malda Block	Malda GP
No. of Primary Schools	7,627	202	22	1,877	99	16
No. of Child Education Centres (SSK)	700	24	2	105	3	0
Primary Schools per 10,000 population*	9.2	9.6	11.2	7.1	6.8	15.8
Average no. of households per school (incl. SSK)	10.0	10.8	12.2	7.5	7.0	15.8
Average no. of school-going children per school	208	N.A.	N.A.	187	138	N.A.
No. of Primary Schoolteachers	18,072	N.A.	N.A.	6,019	321	N.A.
Average no. of teachers per primary school	2.4	N.A.	N.A.	3.2	3.2	N.A.

Teacher-Pupil Ratio	1:88	N.A.	N.A.	1:58	1:43	N.A.
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\* Population per 1991 census. Thus, the schools per population ratio is likely to be worse in reality.

Sources: DPEP School Survey, Malda; Midnapore District Profile; Information from SI.

### 4.1.3 The Local Picture

The selected Midnapore ward is quite well served with primary schools, one located in the ward area in village S (in the following named Mi-PS-1) and another one just outside the ward area (Mi-PS-2). Schoolchildren from village S and most children from village A go to Mi-PS-1; children from village R attend Mi-PS-2. Most children do not have to go farther than 1-1.5 km to reach their school. No new schools have been built in the area recently, except for one SSK about 1.5 km away from village R. However, no children from the selected Midnapore ward attend the SSK.

Furthermore, a small private school that is not approved by the government has been opened recently in village S. There are one or two private tutors per village who give classes at the primary level.

Mi-PS-1 was built in 1959. The school has two semi-pacca rooms, one of which was built recently with EAS funds. There are one or two tables for the teachers and an almira. The children sit on mats on the floor. There are no benches. There is a tube-well for drinking water but not toilet facilities. Two teachers teach about 60-80 regularly attending children of class I-IV. The school has two sanctioned posts. One of these is filled by temporary transfer ordered by the SI. Both teachers are male, general-caste Hindus. One of them has a BA, the other has an A-level degree in science. One teacher is from a nearby village, the other one comes from a neighbouring block.

Mi-PS-2 is significantly bigger than Mi-PS-1. The school started in 1934 and was approved by the government in 1941. The primary school has three rooms. They have recently been made pacca. There is sufficient furniture, including benches for the schoolchildren. Additional facilities (tube-well, toilet) are quite good as the primary school shares the compound with a big high school. Four teachers are employed, one post is vacant. All teachers are general-caste Hindus, one of them is female. Three come from the same block; one is from a town 35km away but well connected by rail.

In Mi-PS-1 and Mi-PS-2, textbooks provided by the state government are available to all schoolchildren. There is usually no significant delay in the distribution of these books by the panchayat. From the distribution of free dresses to SC/ST girls, the children of a nearby hostel seem to benefit the most. The distribution of the centrally sponsored midday meal has recently become erratic.

The selected Malda ward is equally well covered with primary schools than the Midnapore ward. However, physical access to the schools is worse, particularly in the rainy season, because of inadequate roads. One school (Ma-PS-1) is located within the ward area in village J. Another primary school (Ma-PS-2) is located in an adjacent village. The majority of the schools children from poor households in the selected Malda ward go to either of these two schools. Schoolchildren from village J and village I go to Ma-PS-1; children from village K go to Ma-PS-2. These primary schools are within 1½ kilometre from the respective villages, except for the schoolchildren of the tribal hamlet N. The hamlet N is equidistant from three primary

schools, including Ma-PS-1 and Ma-PS-2, that are all about 2½ km away. The parents here send their children to missionary boarding schools elsewhere in the district. Some children from the other three villages, mainly from non-poor general-caste households, do not go to Ma-PS-1 or Ma-PS-2 either but to bigger primary schools further away that have the high school in the same compound. Private tuition classes at the primary level are held in village K and in village J.

Ma-PS-1 was sanctioned by the district-level school board (now DPSC) in 1978. Teaching started in a kaccha building that was destroyed in a storm in 1987. Then, for three years teaching went on without building under a tree. In 1990, a one-room pacca building including a veranda were constructed. In 1997, one pacca room was added to the existing building. The older room is functional, but the new one is in shambles. During a storm the tin-shed flew away and hurt a schoolgirl on the head. In 2000, this room was still without roof, and could only be used when there was no rain. The school is equipped with tables and almirahs for the teachers and with benches for the students. There is a tube-well for drinking water but no toilet facilities.

Ma-PS-1 has five teachers for the 102 enrolled schoolchildren. Actual attendance is far less, maybe around 40-50. All the teachers come from nearby towns about 5-10 kilometres away. All of them are male and general-caste Hindus. Only the headmaster seems to have undergone Basic Teacher Training. He has been teaching here since the start of the school in 1978. Two other teachers have a BA and two completed high school.

Ma-PS-2 started as a no-building school in 1982 when it was sanctioned by the school board with three teachers. Soon later, villagers constructed a kaccha building. In 1986, the DPSC constructed a two-room pacca building. The two rooms are in fairly good shape. There are also tables and almirahs for the teachers and benches for the students. The school compound has one tube-well for drinking water but there are no toilet facilities.

Ma-PS-2 has three teachers for 119 enrolled children. Two posts, including the one of headmaster, are vacant. The acting headmaster is a male Muslim who has completed high school. The other two teachers are general-caste Hindus. One of them is female and has completed class IX and a mother-teacher training. The other one has completed high school and a junior basic teacher training. The teachers live in villages not very far from the school.

In Ma-PS-1 and Ma-PS-2, the distribution of textbooks is often delayed by two or three months. As in Midnapore, the distribution of the centrally sponsored midday meal has recently become erratic. Earlier it was distributed quarterly.

Generally, the school infrastructure in the four studied primary schools is similarly insufficient. The school environment is also similar but seems to be best in Mi-PS-1 and Ma-PS-2, as there are no distractions from a nearby high school (Mi-PS-2) or from the main village path and drunken neighbours (Ma-PS-1). The Malda schools, particularly Ma-PS-1, have significantly more teachers per student than the Midnapore schools. Both primary schools in Malda meet the government target of having a teacher-student ratio of 1:40. The number of teachers in Midnapore is insufficient. The formal qualifications of the teachers at the studied schools are similar in Malda and Midnapore. Many lack basic teacher training.

Table 25 summarises indicators of school infrastructure at the selected village schools and compares them with the situation at the district level.

Table 25: School infrastructure in selected primary schools

	Mi-PS-1	Mi-PS-2	Ma-PS-1	Ma-PS-2	Midnapore District	Malda District
Schoolchildren per school	109	296	102	119	208	187
No. of rooms	2	3	2	2	N.A.	1.9
Schoolchildren per room	55	99	51	60	N.A.	100
No. of Teachers per school	2	4	5	3	2.4	3.2
Teacher-Pupil Ratio	1:55	1:74	1:20	1:40	1:88	1:58

\* Population per 1991 census. Thus, the schools per population ratio is likely to be worse in reality.

Sources: DPEP School Survey, Malda; Midnapore District Profile.

#### 4.1.4 The Management and Politics of Providing School Infrastructure

The development of school-building infrastructure became the matter of panchayats in 1992. The zilla parishad sanctions new school buildings, extensions and repairs on recommendation of the Education Standing Committee, where the Chairperson of the District Primary School Council (DPSC) and the District Inspector (Primary Schools) are ex-officio members. Shortlists are first made in the panchayat samiti standing committees where also the recommendations of the Sub-Inspector (SI) are taken into consideration, yet with limited influence. Teachers' salaries and the small monthly contingency fund of Rs. 22 per school continue to come directly from the DPSC.

In Debra circle (covering almost 100 primary schools on about half the area of Debra block), only 2 new primary school buildings have been sanctioned in the past 3 years. But neither of these schools has been built, because the allotment of funds was delayed, insufficient or not topped up with local contributions.

Mi-PS-1 was built, like most other schools here by local initiative and received government support only later. The school building has been renovated and extended since then – recently with EAS funds. But the EAS money for extension was not sufficient to complete the works with one instalment. Some villagers were trying to get a primary school in Village A. They approached the CPM Local Committee, but were told that bigger villagers than Village A are still without school and should therefore get priority. Proposals for school extensions and repairs are made in the gram sangsads.

There are 24 SSKs in Debra block, two SSKs in Jalimanda GP. Both started in December 1997. The kaccha buildings were built under the BMS. Each SSK receives Rs. 13,000 contingency fund. It is interesting to note that in both cases a CPM Local Committee member lobbied for the SSK. Both have become the chairperson of the managing committee and their wife or their daughter, respectively, have been

employed as teachers. It is very obvious that vested interest played a big role in deciding the location of the SSK. One SSK is situated only about 200 metres away from an ordinary primary school. The chairperson and his wife's justification sounded not very convincing to me: The small children would have to cross the railways to reach the school (there were two accidents) – but schoolchildren who go to the ordinary primary school have to cross the rail lines too. The LEOSE Debra block argued that the local primary school was overcrowded, which is true but does not justify that the SSK was built in the same village and not in a nearby village without primary school.

In Old Malda block, there are 7 schools per 10,000 persons. In the studied gram panchayat, which is close to the town area, the situation is significantly better with 16 schools per 10,000 persons. Ma-PS-2 has been more successful in regard to infrastructure development than Ma-PS-1 in Village J. In the former, the headmaster-in-charge, himself an active CPM member and former panchayat samiti member, and the school secretary have approached the panchayat samiti, the CPM Local Committee (because the panchayat samiti sanctions projects “by direction of the party”) and departmental staff (because they can still have an influence on the zilla parishad's decision). Repair and extension works have been done properly.

This school started unofficially 1981 on the initiative of some villagers, including SC/ST. With the support of the CPM Zonal Party Office, they asked the District Primary School Council (DPSC) to approve the school, which happened in 1982. Three teachers were allotted by the DPSC (all the three still teach here), but the school remained without a building until 1985; the CPM party leaders, including a candidate to the Lok Sabha, explained that there was not sufficient money available and that the villagers should “wait and see and stay in touch”. So, classes were held under a mango tree but teaching was frequently interrupted by rain and storms. After storm and rains in 1982, the teachers organised a village meeting and asked the villagers to donate money, material and labour for the construction of a bamboo roof.

The guardians and the teachers were still dissatisfied with the situation. In 1984-85, the teachers called another village meeting in order to get support for a mass petition to the SI and DI asking for a pacca school building. The villagers were able to find the required land (through the donation of a villager), and the school building was sanctioned in 1986 by the DM and constructed in 1987. (Ma T202)

It appears that in parallel to using the administrative channels of the school bureaucracy, personalized networks and connections to the CPM were also mobilized to push for the school building in the case of Ma-PS-2. One of the initiators of the village school, and school secretary then and now, had good connections with the CPM. He approached the party leaders again in the mid-1980s. (Ma V202) This may have contributed to the success of the formal petition.

In more recent times, the panchayats play a more important role in deciding on school infrastructure. One village respondent (Ma V202) told us that the panchayat samiti would sanction school infrastructure projects but “by direction of the party” (Ma V202). One of the local teachers confirmed: “Now, things are different. We have to turn to the GP in the first place when we want the school building repaired or extended.” (Ma T202). The DI now sends the headmasters to the panchayat samiti with their demands; money is then allocated to the respective gram panchayat. Ma-

PS-2 received money for school repairs directly from the gram panchayat in 1998 for the first time.

While decisions on material school improvements have shifted from the school bureaucracy towards the elected panchayats, the provision also seems to have become increasingly politicized, as the following example from a nearby village attests:

Just before the Lok Sabha elections, the villagers made their voices heard and demanded that their school should get a pucca building. [An influential panchayat samiti member], in vote-catching mode, supported them and money was allotted... [Laughing] There is much more chance for launching public demands just before elections. (Ma V202)

The increased politicization was also lamented by two teachers posted at Ma-PS-1 in Village J. While the panchayats were not involved in decisions on the construction of school building, this situation changed in the 1990s. Now, the panchayats even have a say about where new schools are built – although their power seems limited to new school buildings constructed under the EAS.

However, in the 1980s it was not easy either to get the attention of the school bureaucracy. In 1987, for example, a storm demolished the Ma-PS-2 school building. Teaching had to shift outside (under a tree) for 2 or 3 years. The teachers tried to draw the SI's attention to this situation in their regular monthly reports. But action was taken only after a local newspaper published reports and photographs of the school. DPSC eventually allotted Rs. 35,000 in 1989-1990, and informed the teachers that they should organise and supervise the construction themselves. (Ma T201)

According to these teachers, the panchayat samiti immediately tried to take control of this project, although the construction of school infrastructure was at that time under the supervision of the Department of Education (that is under the DPSB and its officers) and should have been supervised by the headmaster. Panchayat samiti members threatened the teachers to harass them with complaints about their teaching and absenteeism. Further they threatened to accuse the teachers of fund diversion by telling the villagers that Rs. 80,000 would have been sanctioned for this project. The teachers would have to face the wrath of the village people. Given these threats, the teachers of Ma-PS-1 eventually stepped aside, and a contractor was engaged by the panchayat samiti. The building quality was allegedly low and not all works were completed according to plan. For example, only one instead of two doors were provided.

The panchayat samiti seems to have been lacking in transparency in the case of the construction of an additional school room in 1997, which was sanctioned after a mass petition organized by the teachers was submitted to the panchayat samiti. The construction was done during the Puja break. The teachers, who live in the town and not in the village, suspect that the gram panchayat did this deliberately to avoid the supervision of the work by the teachers (which would be an official requirement under the EAS) and that money has been diverted. (Ma T201). (Indeed, the quality of that extension is very bad. During a storm, for example, the tin-shed flew away and hurt a schoolgirl on the head. Now, this room is without roof, and can only be used when there is no rain.)

The teachers complained to the ZP that they were not involved in the school project. They complained only verbally although the DPSB Chairperson asked them to file a written complaint. "We are too scared to complain in writing. They [the party] would try to harm us." (Ma T201). They also believe that approaching government officers, such as the BDO, would be pointless as they work under the order of the elected

panchayats, the Sabhapati and the Sabhadhipati. Currently, they try to lobby directly with the Pradhan and the Sabhapati for the construction of a bathroom for the school. The matter is also discussed with the SI.

The Teacher Unions do not play any role in the lobbying for better school infrastructure, nor do they point out corruptive practices of certain panchayat members. According to teachers in Malda, the CPM stands behind both the panchayats and the union. As one of them told us: “What can we do? The party and the panchayat are closely interrelated. But so are the union and the party.” It seems that both the union and the panchayat samiti supports the teachers who are closest to the party, as in Ma-PS-2, where the headmaster is an active party member and was once a panchayat samiti member. Schools with a strong teacher-party link get more projects and malpractice is also not so widespread (Ma T201).

A district-level officer confirmed the uneven distribution of funds for school infrastructure in Malda, which would be “caused by the personal degeneration and dishonesty.” (Ma 201). Furthermore, there are capacity problems of the school bureaucracy. The SIs have only limited information, as they have no vehicles and thus are not able to visit all schools on a regular basis. They therefore depend on information from the headmasters during meetings. And they are lobbied by panchayat members. So there might already be a bias in the lists of necessary school repairs prepared by the SI when this list is forwarded to the ZP Standing Committee. There, the lists are amended and prioritized in consultation with panchayat members of various levels. The influence of government officers in these meetings is limited. (MA B201) About 40-70% of the proposals by the SI are accepted and sanctioned. (Ma 201).

Generally, the schools remain without any financial autonomy. They are dependent on the panchayats (and the CPM behind it) for the development of the school infrastructure.

Regarding the SSK, this state-government programme started in Malda district only in 1999-2000. Four SSK have been sanctioned in Old Malda block; up to November 1999, three have been built. According to the EOSE, the site selection by the zilla parishad reflects political power rather than need. Two of the three SSK run in the building of ordinary primary schools, but at different times early in the morning.

Different interpretations of the government guidelines seem to exist in the district. Some say that SSK must be in villages with no school within a radius of 1 km, as per government guidelines. The EOSE in both Malda and Midnapore were aware of such a rule. By contrast, the Perspective Plan for DPEP in Malda district reads that SSK should whenever possible run in existing buildings, including primary schools. The idea of the DPEP plan is that SSK should run on different schooling hours than the primary school. Generally, the dynamics of government-sponsored development of school infrastructure related to the SSK program is very similar to EAS, and is therefore not further discussed here.

#### 4.1.4 Distribution of School Books

Textbooks and teaching materials are provided by the state government (Dept. of Education); the central government sends the rice for the midday-meal programme

and dresses for SC/ST girls. These are all distributed through the gram panchayats. The EOSE (block-level Executive Officer School Education) supervises the distribution of books to the GP offices.

The distribution of books is sometimes delayed for 2-3 months. The school bureaucracy and the panchayat put the blame on each other for these delays: The SI remarked that the books would sit for weeks with the gram panchayat; the gram panchayat claims that they have been given too few books. The EOSE added that the books reach the GP office, but were sometimes not collected by the teachers

## **4.2 Availability of Teachers: Recruitment, Appointment and Transfers**

### ***4.2.1 Teacher Situation in Midnapore and Malda District***

The availability of primary schoolteachers is insufficient in both Malda and Midnapore district. The teacher-pupil ratio in Midnapore is 1:88. In Malda district, it is 1:58, but still falling below the target set by the state government of 1:30. Both districts failed to fill all the sanctioned post. In Malda, 1,156 posts (16%) remained vacant in 1998-99 (Perspective Plan of DPEP, Malda, 1999). In Midnapore, 2,493 posts (12%) were vacant due to recruitment problems (figures from (Perspective Plan of DPEP, Malda, 1999).

Moreover, the teachers are not well distributed among the various schools. In Malda district, for example, the teacher-pupil ratio is as low as 1:19 in the municipalities while the ratio is worse than 1:80 in some rural blocks of the district (figures from (Perspective Plan of DPEP, Malda, 1999).

A staggering 35% of the primary schoolteachers in Malda district are untrained teachers. The number of untrained teachers is significantly higher in urban areas where they account for 57% of all teaching staff. Many of these were appointed before new recruitment rules came into effect in 1991 that favour formally trained teachers. Some teachers – for example, family members of deceased teachers – have been appointed on compassionate grounds. The high number of untrained teachers has adversely affected teaching quality (Perspective Plan of DPEP, Malda, 1999).

Among the studied primary schools, the availability of teachers is particularly problematic in Midnapore. Mi-PS-1 is a small school with only two sanctioned posts. Both posts are filled, but one of these only by temporary transfer ordered by the SI. Both teachers are male, general-caste Hindus. One of them has a BA, the other has an A-level degree in science. One teacher is from a nearby village, the other one comes from a neighbouring block. The teacher-student ratio is 1:55.

The teacher-pupil ratio is even worse (i.e., 1:74) in the bigger primary school Mi-PS-2, which shares the compound with a junior high school. Four teachers are employed, one post is vacant. All teachers are general-caste Hindus, one of them is female. Three come from the same block; one is from a town 35km away but well connected by rail.

In the studied ward in Old Malda, the availability of teachers is better because of the vicinity to a town. Ma-PS-1 has five teachers for the 102 enrolled schoolchildren. All the teachers come from nearby towns about 5-10 kilometres away. All of them are male and general-caste Hindus. Only the headmaster seems to have undergone Basic



Teacher Training. He has been teaching here since the start of the school in 1978. Two other teachers have a BA and two completed high school.

Ma-PS-2 has three teachers for 119 enrolled children. Two posts, including the one of headmaster, are vacant. The acting headmaster is a male Muslim who has completed high school. The other two teachers are general-caste Hindus. One of them is female and has completed class IX and a mother-teacher training. The other one has completed high school and a junior basic teacher training. The teachers live in villages not very far from the school.

#### 4.2.2 Teacher Recruitment

In West Bengal, the DPSCs are responsible for the recruitment and appointment of primary schoolteachers. As for other government jobs, the Employment Exchange Officers send lists of candidates to the DPSC. Until recently, the candidates were selected 60% on marks in the final school exam and 40% based on an interview with the DPSC. Obviously, this system allowed a lot of “flexibility” for the recruitment of part of the DPSC. It is an open secret that the successful candidate had to pay Rs. 10,000-50,000 depending on his/her political connections. This is probably not unusual in India. (Monthly salaries are between Rs. 3,350-6,325 for teachers with junior basic training.)

As a consequence of this recruitment policy and the corruption and nepotism it nurtured, non-selected candidates have often successfully disputed the validity of the selection in the court. They were charging Employment Exchange Officers and the Council with corruption. All over West Bengal, sections of the panels came under injunction; few teachers could be recruited and posts remained vacant. We have not been able to find systematic information on which districts in West Bengal were the most affected by court injunctions. However, a district-level officer in Mindapore, pointing to a closet full of court papers, proclaimed: “This is the district of court cases.” (Mi 201)

Some representatives of the CPM-led All Bengal Primary Teachers Association (ABPTA) blamed opposition parties to have obstructed the selection process for political reasons. But it is difficult to deny that the teacher recruitment was politically biased – most of the teachers are members of the ABPTA, many of them are also active in the CPM and (former) panchayat office-bearers. The well-paid schoolteachers have plenty of time to be active in politics. People within the party resent that some have also joined the party only to get better chances for an appointment. Once a schoolteacher, they have become less active in the party.

A government circular of 1991 announced a new recruitment method based more on merits (65% marks, 20% teacher training, 5% co-curricular activities). The interview weighs only 10%. However, this recruiting system was implemented long after the circular was published. In Midnapore district, the first recruitment under the new method could finally be done in April 1999. This time, there have been no allegations of corruption and court injunctions. In Malda, no recruitment has made under the new system so far. We have not been able yet to find out the reasons for the low adoption of the new recruitment policy.

In Midnapore district, no teacher recruitment could be done between 1983 and 1996, except for appointments on compassionate grounds. Finally in April 1999, about

2,600 teachers could be recruited after a 3-year long process. Still, about 2,500 posts (ca. 10%) remain vacant in the district. Teacher-pupil ratios are 1:55 and 1:74 in the two primary schools of our area of study.

In Malda, the extent of the problem is similar as in Midnapore. No recruitment could be done since 1996. Out of more than 7,000 posts in the district almost 1,000 remained vacant. However, the staffing problem is also less serious in Old Malda than in Debra because actual school attendance is less regular here.

In the well-connected Old Malda block, the staffing problem seems not very acute. For example, Ma-PS-1 has had no appointment problem; all the five posts are filled so that five teachers teach the 40-50 students who regularly attend school (The school register keeps 102 names, but even in that case the teacher-pupil ratio is only 1:20). In Ma-PS-2, there are three teachers and two posts are vacant (including the post of headmaster for the past 2-3 years). Official teacher-pupil ratio is 1:43. The unequal allotment of teachers to school has to do with accessibility and corruption. Ma-PS-1 is easily accessible from the nearby town (15 minutes by bicycle); political connection and bribes are likely to have led to the appointment of a sufficient number of teachers there while the “informal market” discriminates in terms of staffing against more peripheral schools such as Ma-PS-2. The situation is more acute in more remote areas of Malda district; it is better in the towns. As one teacher told us:

All the brothers, daughters and in-laws of the political leaders got posted there. The council [DPSC] never transfers a teacher from a rural area to an urban area. Rural teachers are discriminated in this way. The school council is fully politicised. (Ma T201)

In contrast to the ordinary primary schools, the SSK (lady) teachers are appointed by the Managing Committee comprising guardians, educated villagers and the GP member. The SSK teachers are employed on limited-term contracts. The contract is to be renewed annually by the Managing Committee. Teachers must be female, at least 40 years old and have passed Madhyamik (for SC/ST class VIII standard is required). They do more or less the same job as the primary schoolteachers but earn only Rs. 1,000 per month.

Nepotism in SSK teacher appointments has already been mentioned. In both SSKs in the studied GP, CPM leaders were able to arrange jobs for unemployed female family members. For other posts, there was competition. In one SSK, a woman below 40 years was employed because she had close connections with a party leader from the nearby village. However, an unemployed, educated widow who also met the age requirements protested against this. She approached the Pradhan and the chairperson of the managing committee. Although she is not close to the CPM and the said party leader was against her appointment, she succeeded in replacing the other SSK teacher and getting the job. It seems that nepotism does not always work beyond the framework of rules and regulations.

In Old Malda block, four out of the six SSK teachers do not meet the age requirement. According to the EOSE, no other candidates were available. It is likely that these teachers will not be paid the salary.

#### 4.2.3 Appointments on compassionate grounds

There are two kinds of appointments on compassionate grounds: a family member gets a posting if (a) the schoolteacher and main breadwinner of the family expires, and (b) if the teacher is physically unable to teach anymore. There are allegation that “crooked people” go to the doctor shortly before retirement age and ask the doctor to issue a certificate falsely stating that they are physically unable to teach anymore. In this way, the permanent job passes onto the son or daughter. About 200-300 out of 6000 teachers have been appointed on compassionate grounds. Earlier, there was no such provision. Now, up to 10% can be appointed in this way.

#### 4.2.4 Teacher Transfers

The appointment of a teacher to a particular school is officially decided by the DPSC. The lack of choice of appointment within the district presents a problem for teachers; the distance between their residence and the school is certainly a factor of absenteeism. However, as already indicated, teacher appointments and transfers are linked to corrupt practices. A district-level officer in Malda remarked that some teachers bring faked health certificates to him showing that they are physically unfit to teaching anywhere else than in her town.

The teacher unions play an important role in influencing teacher transfers (and in hindering the better distribution of teachers in remote parts). The unions have representatives in the DPSCs, in accordance to their membership numbers. In Malda district, for example, 63% of the primary school teachers are members of the All Bengal Primary Teacher Association (ABPTA); the INC-affiliated PSKS plays a less important role in influencing teacher appointments, transfers and promotions.

### **4.3 Quality of Teaching**

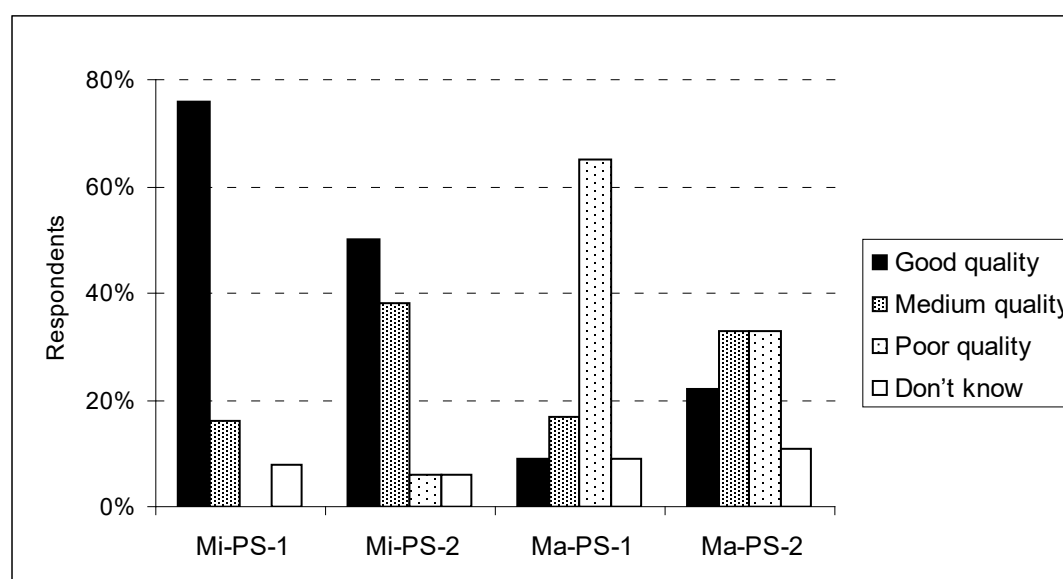
Although poor school infrastructure and teacher shortage are certainly general problems of West Bengal’s primary school system, these two factors fail to explain the difference in quality of education provided by the four studied primary schools. Indeed, in the villagers’ assessment, the school with the best teacher-pupil ratio (Ma-PS-2) fared by far the worst (see Table 26). Our (unsystematic) field observations confirmed the villagers’ view: children attending this school in Old Malda lacked basic literacy skills while schoolchildren in Debra, even those who did not take private-tuition classes, knew at least how to read and write.

Table 26: Perceived quality of education in studied primary schools

	Mi-PS-1 (N=25)	Mi-PS-2 (N=16)	Ma-PS-1 (N=23)	Ma-PS-2 (N=9)
Good quality	76%	50%	9%	22%
Medium quality	16%	38%	17%	33%
Poor quality	0%	6%	65%	33%
Don't know	8%	6%	9%	11%
Total	100%	100%	100%	99%

Source: Village Questionnaire Survey

Figure 1: Perceived quality of education of studied primary schools



Source: Village Questionnaire Survey

The crucial factor determining the quality of education proved to be the quality of teaching and, in particular, the motivation, dedication and sincerity of the teachers. This subsection, therefore, focuses on teachers and their interrelation with the education bureaucracy, villagers, community and other organizations. Other factors of teaching quality, such as curriculum and pedagogy, will be dealt with only marginally at the end of the subsection.

#### 4.3.1 The Teachers

The village surveys identified teachers as the most important factor and actor influencing the quality of education in the studied primary schools: 63% of the interviewees with school-going children in Debra, and 50% in Old Malda, regarded the sincerity of schoolteachers and headmasters as one of two main reasons for either good quality or bad quality of their primary school. The sincerity of teachers in Debra

was generally perceived positive, while the image of teachers in Old Malda was much more negative (see Table 27)

Table 27: Factors and indicators of school quality

s	Midnapore Ward (N=51)			Malda Ward (N=48)		
	Factor	Pos.	Neg.	Factor	Pos.	Neg.
Availability of teachers	3	1	2	2	0	2
Regularity of teacher attendance	2	2	0	3	1	2
Sincerity of teachers	32	29	3	24	7	17
Pedagogy	2	0	2	7	3	4
Co-operation from guardians	7	4	3	3	0	3
Interest of children	2	2	0	6	4	2
Facilities	11	10	1	1	0	1
Other	3	2	1	10	5	5
Total	62	50	12	56	20	36

\*Parents with school-going children could give max. two answers

Source: Village Questionnaire Survey

Again, our impressions based on spot visits confirmed the villagers' assessment, especially in the case of Ma-PS-1. The headmaster and the teachers of this well-staffed school displayed notorious indifference not seen at other schools. No teaching was going on at all when we periodically passed by the school. Rather, the teachers sat on the school veranda, read the newspaper and chatted while the schoolchildren were running around and playing unsupervised. Even when we paid an announced visit to the school, only one teacher stood up and made a weak attempt at giving class. The other studied primary school in Old Malda was visibly better, yet the teachers paid attention to only a few children. (We don't know whether the teachers' attention to a few children reflects any class or caste bias.) The majority of schoolchildren here were also entertaining themselves on the school compound. By contrast, teaching went on in a systematic and disciplined manner in both studied primary schools in Debra. All children were sitting in orderly lines inside the classrooms with books and blackboard in front of them. When passing the school, we never saw children unsupervised but at times heard them from inside the building reciting texts.

Perhaps surprisingly, teacher absenteeism was no significant problem in the studied villages. The teachers of the studied schools in Debra invariably attended work. In Old Malda, only two of 48 interviewees with school-going children reported that irregular teacher attendance would affect the quality of education, and these complaints did not refer to the studied village schools. It is likely that more remote

schools face more significant problems with teacher absenteeism. Complete absenteeism is one thing, but some teachers in Old Malda tended to come late and leave early. Very often, the teachers of Ma-PS-1 were at the school for no more than two hours a day instead of the stipulated four hours. Villagers seemed to be unaware of the school hours. Even their *gram panchayat* representative, who portrayed himself as taking a keen interest in village education, thought that schooling was officially only three hours a day.

Villagers singled out particular teachers as “bad” or “good”, and their judgements were fairly uniform. (Bad teachers were named “chatterboxes”, “gossips”, “lazy”, “always late”, “disinterested”, etc.) This suggests that individual attributes of teachers, particularly their sincerity and dedication, were crucial for the quality of education the school-going children were getting. Such individual attributes appeared to be more important in Old Malda than in Debra, where checks by the *panchayats* and the community were more effective (see below).

Educational background and teacher training appeared to have little influence on the motivation of teachers and teaching quality. An education official in Malda who shared our and the villagers’ assessment that the sincerity of teachers would be the most important factor of the quality of education commented that “teachers cannot be made dedicated. Training, practice and new methods can make technically good, but not necessarily dedicated, teachers” (Ma 201). 13 of the 14 teachers of the studied primary schools in Debra and Old Malda completed high school, the other one having passed the “mother teacher” training. Some teachers even hold a university degree, but not all of them attended the Basic Teacher Training. Although the studied primary schools have a high proportion of SC and ST students, they have 13 general-caste Hindu and one Muslim teacher appointed. The fact that only two female teachers were appointed makes it possible that there is in many cases not only a “cultural” but also a gender gap between teachers and students. Furthermore, none of the teachers lived in the same village as their school was located. Most of them lived in nearby villages of the same block. The five teachers of the rather notorious Ma-PS-1 lived in the nearby town. The teachers’ income furthermore sets them quite far apart from most of the students and their parents. Teachers have recently received a significant pay increase from the Government of West Bengal reacting to persistent lobby of the influential teacher unions [or 10<sup>th</sup> Finance Commission???]. In 1999, a primary schoolteacher in West Bengal earned between Rs. 3,000 and 6,500 depending on years of service and formal qualifications (schooling and teacher training).

A regular and comparatively high salary is obviously not motivation enough for good teaching. Some teachers even subcontract their job for about Rs. 2,000 and then concentrate on their private business (Ma 201). Others may spend a lot of their time in politics (Ma B202). But even for those teachers with no significant activities on the side, there is little incentive for good teaching. Their pay structure is not linked to performance. There is also no merit-based system of promotion to become headmaster, which is the only possible career step anyway. Perhaps even the recruitment, which allegedly includes nepotism and bribery (see Ch. 4.3), adversely affects teachers’ work ethics or their sense of professionalism. A very weak incentive for good teaching may be district, state and national teaching awards. The “Best Teacher of the District” award is based on criteria that are difficult to monitor such as regularity, punctuality and school results, and the teachers’ association selects the winner of the state award even without any criteria. A district-level education official admitted that these awards fail to even identify good teachers, not to speak of

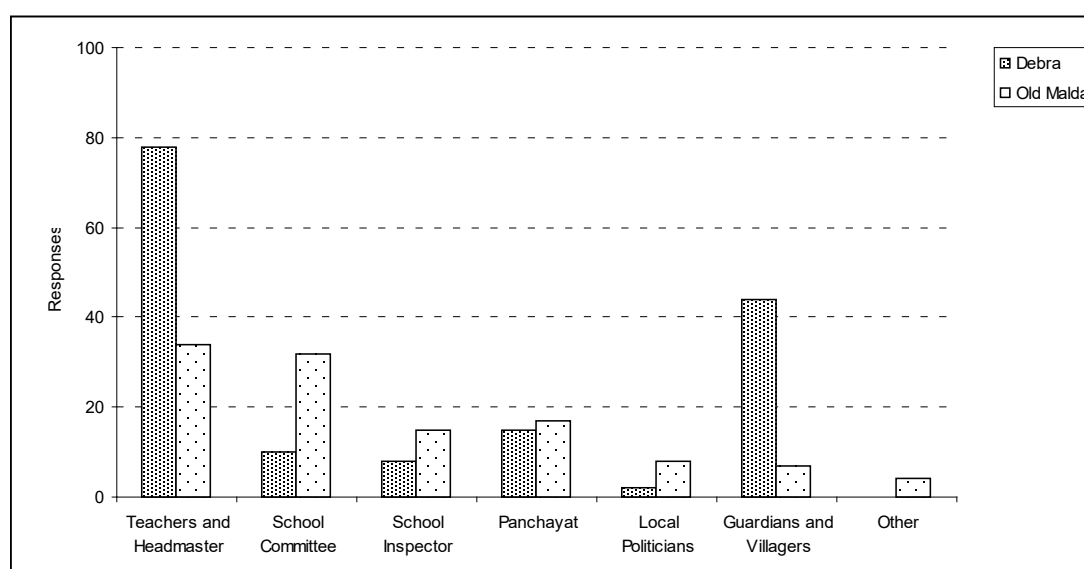
providing effective incentives (Ma 202). A more informal incentive for good teaching would be to gain the respect of villagers, or improve one's social status within the community. As mentioned above, however, teachers are mostly posted from outside the village. Their moral obligation to the village community is therefore limited – and even more so if there is a growing caste and class divide as in the case of Old Malda. Few teachers in Old Malda would see themselves as contributing to a public good, or carrying out the “patriotic duty to educate our children” as Malda's DPSC Chairperson put it (Ma 201).

To be fair to the teachers, irregular attendance of school children certainly makes teaching more difficult, and some teachers have to teach different classes at the same time. However, the comment of a teacher in Malda that “education would improve automatically if students turned up more regularly” (Ma T201) needs to be taken with a pinch of salt. The comment was not least intended to direct blame for bad quality of education away from teachers. Generally we felt that for many, if not for most, being a teacher was about “having a job” rather than about “doing a job”.

In group interviews with villagers in Old Malda, we heard that the teachers of Ma-PS-1 sent a letter to all the guardians requesting them to send their children to private tuition. According to the villagers, the teachers intend to conceal their own negligence and failure in this way. Now, about 90% of the children attending primary school regularly also go to private tuition. The parents feel that there is no use of sending them only to the primary school as they do not learn anything there. All they learn, they learn from the private tutor. They go to the government school only for the certificates.

Figure 2 underlines again the importance of the teachers and headmasters. In the absence of individual commitment, however, and due to the lack of positive economic or social incentives for good teaching, checks and controls on teachers proved to determine school quality to a great extent. Figure 2 gives an impression of the relative importance of various actors in the primary education system in Debra and Old Malda from the villagers' viewpoint. While the field-level officials of the Department of Education were generally regarded as fairly unimportant, if they were known at all, the interviewees in Debra and Old Malda diverged in their assessment of the role of informal community pressure versus formal local organizations. Surprisingly at first, villagers in Old Malda assigned more significance to their (defunct) School Attendance Committees than their counterparts in Debra. However, in-depth group interviews suggest that this relates more to the desired rather than the actual role of the committees.

Fig. 2 Actors responsible for school quality



Source: Village Questionnaire Survey

While Figure 2 describes the influence of various actors on the general quality of schools, including physical infrastructure, we concentrate in the following more specifically on the influence of the various actors on the performance of teachers.

#### 4.3.2 Administrative Monitoring of Schools and Teachers

The formal system of school and teacher inspections of the Department of Education relies at the field level on Sub-Inspectors (SI) of Primary Schools. The SIs are responsible for making regular, announced and surprise, visit to the schools of their “circle” of about 60-110 schools. The boundaries of school circles and their meagre staffing (one SI, one lower division clear and one peon) have not been changed since the 1930s despite the steep increase of primary schools and teachers since then. According to their official job description, SIs have to make at least 10 school inspections per month that, provided equal distribution, would mean one or two visits to each primary school per year. However, the interviewed SIs admitted that they would only do 5-6 inspections per month because of serious capacity problems, including lack of clerical staff and vehicles (SIs can borrow the DPSC jeep only occasionally). The studied primary schools, all of which not very remote, were visited by the respective SI once a year – except for Ma-PS-2 that had not been inspected in four years. In any case, the SIs are tied up with non-academic, clerical work and meetings, as the SI of Old Malda reported:

Inspections are fully neglected ... 20 days per month, I spend for jobs that should be done by a peon... The SI's job has become of a multipurpose nature. There are no boundaries to the type of work we have to do. (Ma B201)

For instance, the quoted SI has to prepare 350 teacher salaries and payments of pensions. SIs also process applications of retirements and manage teacher leaves. They are also involved in textbook distribution and government programmes such as the midday meal, operation black board and dresses for SC/ST girls. On top of that, there are five or six meetings per month in the *panchayats*, the block office and at the DPSC, and SIs as other government officers are sometimes called for special



government work (e.g., elections, census). As a consequence, inspections are neglected. The District Inspectors (DI) of Primary Schools, immediately senior to the SIs, being aware of the capacity problems at the circle level, turn at least a blind eye to the insufficient number of completed inspections (see Mi 201). In some cases, they even seem to urge SIs to prioritise non-academic work (Ma B201).<sup>8</sup>

The capacity problems of the formal administrative inspection system are certainly real and affect the remotest schools the most. However, when school inspections do take place occasionally, they are largely ineffective in controlling or improving teacher behaviour. Very often, the inspections focus on the physical infrastructure or on verifying the teacher-student ratio in order to put forward requests for additional room, posts, filling vacancies, etc. Inspections do little more than complement the information flow between SI and teachers in monthly meetings. In Old Malda, some teachers even hinder more rigorous inspections, and interfere when the SI makes an attempt to look beyond the façade of building and attendance register to engage in conversations with schoolchildren in order to check their progress. As the SI of Old Malda reported (Ma B201, see also Ma 201), the teachers would say: “Why are you asking such questions [to the students]? You can see the attendance register and you can assess the building and the furniture.”

Formal inspections are not the only mechanism for the flow of information “from below” on the quality of education. But the SI’s infrequent visits to the village schools do not ensure regular direct communication with parents, and this is mostly likely also not sought. In some areas of Old Malda, the SIs get little cooperation from the villagers, as they are like other government officers regarded as outsiders, which is perhaps unsurprising given the little time spent in the “field”. Of the 200 interviewed households in West Bengal, only one rich and politically well-connected person in Old Malda indicated that we would seek the assistance from the SI if there were problems with teachers. The three-staff Sub-Inspectorate, unlike the Block Office or Land Registration Office, is hardly frequented by ordinary people. Direct, unmediated contacts between education officials and villagers are rare. The SI of Old Malda contended that there is still more direct interaction with villagers (which as we have seen is almost nil in our study area) than with the mostly defunct SACs (Ma B201).

Indeed, the School Attendance Committees are supposed to be school-level community institution to mediate between parents of school-going children and the education bureaucracy. But even where SACs in Old Malda, or at least their secretary, are active to some extent, they have no regular contact with the SI who seems not to pay attention to them (perhaps assuming that they are defunct). When the SAC of Ma-PS-2 once sought the assistance of the SI to correct the behaviour of a particular teacher (absenteeism and coming late), the officer failed to take action or even to give advice. Interestingly, in part through this encounter GM, the school secretary, started to understand the constraints of the SI and the education bureaucracy more generally. He believes that the SI cannot take action because of the political influence, especially if the teacher in question is well connected (see Ma V202). His understanding of the higher levels of the education bureaucracy perhaps falls a bit short because of lack of

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<sup>8</sup> The capacity problem appeared to be even more acute in the case of inspections of secondary schools. SIs of Secondary Schools are often drawn into clerical duties related to a multitude of court cases caused by allegedly politically motivated teacher appointments of the more powerful Managing Committees of secondary schools. On SI remarked: “I sometimes think that I’m an assistants to a lawyer [rather than a school inspector].” (Ma B201)

direct experience. GM wrongly believes that the District Inspectorate would be more independent and less politicized by party-affiliated unions than the Sub-Inspectorate. But GM understood that if he wanted to complain directly to the DI about a teacher, this would need to be done with stronger (political and community) backing. In any case, such experiences discourage many to approach the education bureaucracy. This means that the capacity constraints of the education bureaucracy are not further aggravated, but also helped that its main purpose has become (or remained?) to administer teacher salaries and the like rather than ensuring standards of teaching.

In Debra, the generally active SACs seem to turn to the SI more often than those in Old Malda if complaints against teachers need to be brought forward (Mi B201). But like GM in Old Malda planned, SACs in Midnapore district in rare cases have bypassed the SI and turned directly to the DI and the DPSC Chairperson to complain about teachers (and more frequently about distribution of books and the midday meal). As we have not come across such a case directly, we are not able to assess the effectiveness of this strategy. However, we have been told that in such cases the DPSC Chairperson would first give a warning to the teachers in question rather than launching official inquiries and sanctions (Mi 201). Cases of repeat complaints from SACs or villagers seem to have forced the Chairperson to transfer teachers to other schools occasionally (Mi 203). The interesting point here is that the Chairperson seems to bypass the bureaucracy occasionally or, more precisely, the officers of the Department of Education.

We have seen that even if information, in the case of Old Malda this is only a “trickle”, reaches the SI, this does not guarantee that action against wrong-doing teachers will be taken. But what exactly is going on within the education bureaucracy? The situation appears to be very similar in the two studied districts – though education officials in Malda were perhaps a little bit franker to volunteer information to us. The first obstacle in the way of an effective bureaucratic teacher monitoring system is the Sub-Inspectors’ fear of politically influential teachers. Nearly all teachers are members of one or the other party-affiliated union (mostly the All Bengal Primary Teachers’ Association [ABPTA] that is affiliated with the CPI-M), and many teachers are active workers or members of political parties (mostly of the CPI-M, which at least in the first few years in government relied heavily on non-landholding teachers to carry out land reforms). It is probably not very common that a single teacher is able to instigate an SI’s transfer to a remote circle, but politically influential teachers can make sure that an SI is sidelined in *panchayat* decisions and perhaps even shunned by the DPSC. Furthermore, some teachers are also *panchayat* members, or they could become elected in future, and SIs would rely on their cooperation in the distribution of text books, etc. (see Ma B201) This fear, as well as uncertainty about a teacher’s less apparent political connections, leads to a situation where SIs are reluctant to write critical reports or even to take action against wrong-doing teachers that are in their official power, such as blocking suspending the salary for an unlimited time. Indeed, we got to know of only one salary suspension in each Old Malda and Debra. For example, the former SI in Debra only once took this measure in his tenure of 3 ½ years, and this was in an extreme case of a teacher who was often drunk and absent from the school (Mi B202).

This leads to the second and related point that SIs usually do not take action or write unfavourable reports before having discussed the matter with their superior, the DI, as well as the DPSC Chairperson. The SI of Old Malda remarked: “Officially we could [stop a teacher’s salary] if we were bold. But it has become the convention here to

report to the Chairman first and wait for his decision” (Ma B201). And her counterpart in Debra blew in the same horn: “In any case, when I feel ‘uneasy’ to stop a teacher’s payment, I inform the chairperson of the DPSC and let him make the decision. So, I can avoid any trouble [of political interference]” (Mi B201). Even so, the advice to the SI is very often to sort out the problem directly with the teacher and with the involvement of the teacher’s union. SIs are expected to sort out problems on their own. If they can’t, it even reflects badly on their professional capability, as an Assistant Inspector remarked:

If [the SI] works properly, then there is no need for reports. He has enough authority as an officer and should be capable of sorting things out with the teachers. A report is a sign of failure.

Therefore, it would not only be imprudent of the SI to use his or her official authority (e.g., to suspend salaries) without the backing from higher levels, but he or she seems even dissuaded from bringing forward complaints as they could be (mis)taken as a sign of incompetence. Independent actions of SIs, when they are taken at all, are also often reversed (Ma B201).

A third factor contributes to both the disenchantment of the field-level SIs and the ineffectiveness of the inspection system more generally, and to some extent explains the tendency of the mid-level education bureaucracy to pass on the buck to their field-level staff. When reports of SIs on teacher failure occasionally reach the DPSC, which has the supreme authority over suspensions of teachers and transfers, action is in many cases not taken or sustained for long. “The DI and DPSC do not listen to the SIs. This is very frustrating. We’re mentally pushed back” (Ma B201). It is usually political interference that hinders action against wrongdoing teachers. The DPSC is a politicised body comprising the government appointed chairperson (usually a politician himself), MPs and MLAs, the Chairperson of the Zilla Parishad Education Standing Committee and, most remarkably, members from different teachers’ associations. For a teacher with the right political or union connections, it is possible to avoid official sanctions. At the very least, union representatives in the Council may press for meek penalties for their own members and perhaps try to use amicable persuasion outside the formal system (Ma B201, see also Mi 201).

The field-level effect of the politicised teacher inspection system is that the SIs find themselves in a fairly weak position vis-à-vis teachers. But this is of course only relative and differs from teacher to teacher. The SI of Old Malda suggested that about 25% of the primary schoolteachers are well enough connected that they can more or less afford to ignore the SI if they want to. The other 75% of schoolteachers need to take the SI more seriously. They are usually able to avoid sanctions with the assistance of their union, yet not without spending lots of time and energy (Ma B201). The SI can create additional hassle by administratively delaying salary payments. However, hassling, or fearing to be hassled, are of course unlikely to have a significant positive impact on teaching quality. More generally, the formal administrative system of teacher monitoring seems to be largely ineffective to improve the sincerity of the average teachers. In the best case, the system is able to act against extreme forms of teacher misconduct and absenteeism, but it falls short in ensuring overall standards in the quality of teaching.

The politicised teacher unions interfere with the bureaucratic school inspection system, mostly through their representation in DPSC. However, their role in teacher monitoring is more ambivalent. Union claims to spread professionalism among their members may be a bit overstated. However, more powerful teacher unions in some

cases fill the void left by an ineffective formal inspection system and carry out their own school and teacher inspections. For example, a leader of the CPI(M)-led ABPTA visited a few primary schools in Old Malda. He accused the headmaster of Ma-PS-1 of wrongdoing. (We weren't able to find out what the accusations were but in the case of that headmaster one could think of various allegations that could be brought forward and substantiated.) On pressure of the ABPTA leader, the SI suspended the salary. However, the headmaster called on his own union, the Congress-led WBPTA, which worked through the Council and was able to invalidate the ruling after two or three month. The headmaster's salary payments resumed and he was paid reimbursed for the withdrawn payments (Ma T201). Whether union-initiated decisions get reversed or not, they are always likely to be accompanied with accusations of being politically biased – if not politically motivated. In the above-mentioned example, the headmaster is not only a notoriously indifferent teacher but also a fairly active supporter of the Congress Party.

#### 4.3.3 Formal Community Monitoring of Teachers and Schools: School Attendance Committees and Managing Committees

Figure 1 shows that the School Attendance Committees (SAC) were generally regarded as more important actors to ensure the quality of teaching than the SIs. SACs have a small formal role in the supervision of teachers as they sign teacher attendance sheets. Perhaps because of their relative insignificance, they were generally not politicized like the SSK or Junior High School Managing Committees that have a say in teacher appointments. In any case, we found huge regional variations in the composition, function and effectiveness of these committees, which were introduced in 1978 by the Left Front government.

In Debra, the committees were fairly active and fairly well integrated in the education system. They comprised the headmaster of the respective school as secretary, the *gram panchayat* member of the respective ward as the chairperson, the Sub-Inspector of Primary Schools (SI), as well as two educated villagers and eight guardians as non-ex-officio members. The 13-member committees met six times a year and were selected by the annual parents' meetings. However, the SACs were rarely used as a tool to put pressure on teachers. Villagers also felt little need to correct the teachers' behaviour in the studied ward. In neighbouring areas, the *panchayats* and local politicians seemed to be more important to support grassroots pressure (see below).

By contrast, the SACs for the studied primary schools in Old Malda were defunct at the time of our study. (The DPSC Chairperson of Malda mentioned that this would be the case with most SACs in the district [see Ma 202].) The SACs had been rejuvenated last in the late-1980s by the respective headmasters who were probably acting on directives from the Department of Education. But in 1999/2000 we found no current guardians of school-going children involved in the SACs – indeed, many official members had passed away. Chairpersons and secretaries were at least identifiable. The chairperson of Ma-PS-1 admitted that he is not really involved with the committee anymore and that meetings have become irregular during the past few years. At best, they meet once a year. He was more committed to his chairpersonship in a nearby Junior High School, where his son was studying. The school secretaries – KM in Ma-PS-1 and particularly GM in Ma-PS-2 – were more active and involved. They, as well as some *panchayat* members, indicated that they intend to newly elect

and revive the SACs. (This may be due to an order of the DI and in relation to the introduction of DPEP in the district.)

Although some villagers, especially women in village K, were unaware of the school secretary, the skeleton SACs in Old Malda (i.e., the school secretary) still served to some extent as a formal link between the teachers and the community. In village J, villagers expected the school secretary to act on their behalf and have repeatedly complained about the attitude of teachers and the quality of teaching. Such complaints have become more frequent with the immigration of general caste Hindus from Bangladesh. The teachers are accused of just reading the newspapers, gossiping on the veranda and leaving too early – behaviour that our field observations confirmed. However, KP, the school secretary had too little personal and institutional power to correct the behaviour of the teachers. The teachers reacted dismissive to his complaints, and they blame the new pedagogy (see below) and the schoolchildren's lack of interest in studying. Also they show little respect for the SAC members:

The [SAC] members are illiterate and they have not the right conception about their duties. The school committee should come to us for giving recommendations. But in fact we have to go to them and advise them what they have to do. (Ma T201)

But KP resented that he was only used as a rubber stamp, and eventually stopped putting pressure on the teachers. He has become more apathetic, and has internalized the teacher's, rather sarcastic, problem perception:

I think that things will change here once the school gets two more rooms. Then the teachers will be alone in each room and would have no opportunity for gossiping anymore.... After all, the fault lies with the children and their parents and not with the teachers. (Ma V201)

GM, the more dynamic secretary of Ma-PS-2, also has very limited control over the teachers as the SAC seems not to be backed by the education administration (see above). GM resents that the SAC is not enough powerful to discipline a female teacher whose attendance is irregular. His warnings are efficient only for a limited time. The ineffectiveness of the SAC also led to mistrust among villagers that the secretary would be too friendly with the teachers and always be on their side (see Ma V210). Therefore, the school secretaries in the studied Malda ward are less and less sought by villagers for the solution of conflicts in regard to education.

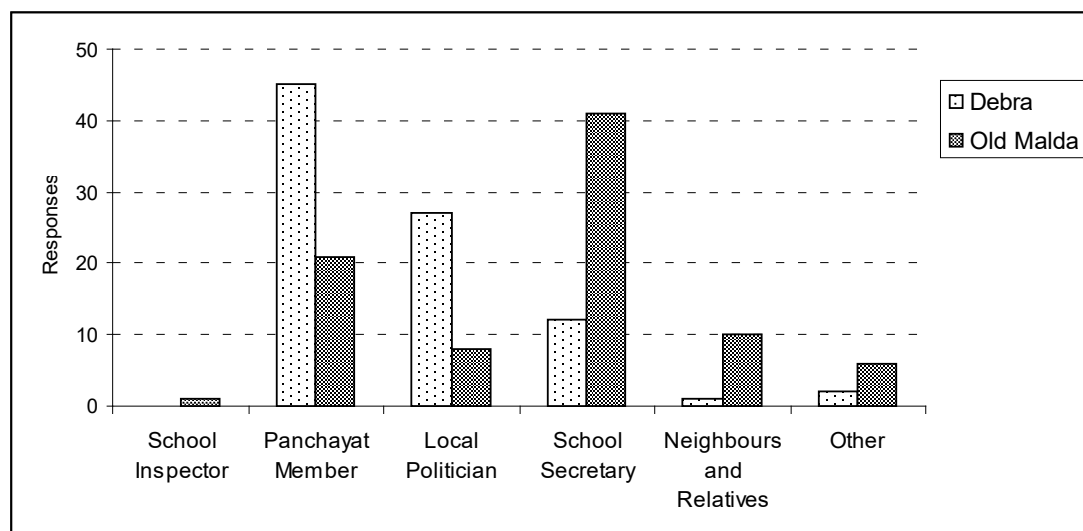
The managing committees of the Shishu Shikha Kendras (SSK) have more formal power over teachers than SACs of the ordinary primary schools, as they can hire and fire the female teachers. In the studied gram panchayats in Debra, however, the participation of guardians was limited. Rather, the managing committees were dominated by their chairpersons, mostly influential CPM leaders who were able to bring an SSK to the village. The guardians, therefore, had little actual control over the teachers (often close relatives) who were handpicked by the chairperson. Nevertheless, the formal control over teachers may have contributed to motivate female SSK teachers to do a good job. Despite much less funding and fast-track teacher training, some SSKs had a better reputation than ordinary primary schools

#### 4.3.4 Informal Local Pressures on Teachers

Figure 2 shows that, particularly in Debra, informal channels (panchayats, politicians and neighbours) were more important for villagers to monitor or correct the behaviour

of teachers than formal channels (SAC, SI). The poor were even more likely than the non-poor to make use of informal channels rather than formal ones.

Fig. 2 Source of Help in Solving Problems with Education, Schools and Teachers



Source: Village Questionnaire Survey

For many poor villagers it is difficult to approach teachers personally not only because of lack of time (especially when the school is in another village) but also because of feelings of inferiority. Many believe that they have no power or standing vis-à-vis the more educated teachers. One group of villagers doubted that they would be able to make good suggestions to the teachers:

If we made a suggestion to the teachers, they would just laugh at us. (Ma V208)

It seems plausible that for someone who has never gone to school it is difficult to evaluate teaching performances, if this evaluation goes beyond detecting teacher absenteeism or continued illiteracy of the schoolchildren.

In Old Malda, however, villagers generally realize that something is wrong at their primary schools because children fail to learn how to write and read if they are not sent to private tuition classes. 19% of the interviewed households also approached teachers personally on various occasions to complain about teacher attendance and unsatisfactory teaching quality, but with little effect. However, these complaints are in most cases individual rather than collectively organized ones. Therefore, the teachers find it easy to dismiss individual complaints blaming irregular attendance of the children for the failure of achieving basic educational goals (see Ma V209, Ma V211). Some teachers even asked the parents to send their children to private tuition classes so that they would learn writing and reading, and the headmaster of Ma-PS-1 allegedly sent a letter to the guardians encouraging them to use private tutors (Ma V207). (Unfortunately, we were not able to get hold of a copy of this letter.)

Moreover, many better educated and more resourceful villagers in Old Malda stopped sending their children to the local primary schools, but send them to schools with better reputation or even private English medium schools. The fact that many non-

poor villagers choose the “exit” option reduces the likelihood and effectiveness of grassroots pressure on the local government education system.

Table 28: Percentage of poor households who have complained about schools and teachers

	Midnapore Ward	Malda Ward
Complained	4%	19%
Not complained	91%	81%
N.A.	5%	-
Total	100%	100%

Source: Village Questionnaire Survey

Only in one case that we encountered in Old Malda did some *Malpahariya* villagers get together under the leadership of a neighbourhood leader and *gheraoed* the teachers (Ma V205). Villagers are generally frustrated and do not feel that any support for educational improvement is coming forward from the *panchayats* or political leaders. In such a situation of little institutional mediation, villagers are more likely to see physical attacks on teachers and the *pradhan* as the only way to improve the situation (see Ma V210). They are also more likely to believe in a conspiracy:

We are poor. We are not highlighted. The party is not interested in us... If we are educated, [the powerful] cannot oppress and dominate us so easily. Ma V209

Local *panchayat* members seemed to have little interest in the education sector that went beyond sanctioning new building infrastructure. The local panchayat member, for example, had the misconception that the primary schools should run three hours as opposed to four hours (see Ma G201). A bit more activity of the *panchayats* could be felt toward the end of our field research, seemingly because of a directive to form VECs for DPEP. However, the teachers seemed to be able to shield themselves from the power of the panchayats.

In Debra, grassroots pressure on teachers was both more institutionalized and more effective than in Old Malda. Panchayats and politicians played an important role behind the scenes. *Pradhans* and other *panchayat* members went beyond their formal authority and even conducted informal school inspection or make surprise school visits (see Ma B203). Furthermore, they are ex-officio members of the SAC.

Conflicts related to teacher attendance and performance tended to be sorted out locally through the actions of common villagers and the SAC. If quarrels between guardians and teachers could not be solved locally, the *pradhan* intervened. He is capable of creating pressure on the teachers because he can easily mobilize people and make the teachers’ life difficult. In synergy with grassroots pressure, the *pradhan* is quite powerful although he plays no official role in the formal education system. He has been able to sort out such problems without recourse to the formal system of teacher monitoring and supervision, nor by asking for the support of the CPM (Mi G201) The only time he had to contact the SI was when school books arrived late. The issue was sorted within 2-3 days after his intervention. Generally, only very few

incidents reach the SI here – for example, by reports of the SAC and villagers’ mass petitions.

**Box: Pradhan’s Intervention in Conflict**

S., the pradhan, mentioned the case of a primary school nearby where a teacher often failed to show up on time. One day, when this teacher came late again, the villagers locked him out. The villagers were determined not to let him enter the school anymore. S. stepped in. He agreed with the villagers that the teacher did wrong. But he also convinced them that teaching must go on and that this agitation would further hamper teaching at this moment. He also sat together with the teacher. For the time being, this conflict has been solved verbally. The pradhan also called for a final meeting between the guardians and the teacher.

In the case of SSKs, the local managing committee supervises the teachers directly. The committee also makes the teacher payments. As the committee employs the teachers on contract basis, it has effective control over the teaching. In Debra block, it seems that teaching at the SSKs is of good quality, in part because of this pressure and despite the fact that the teachers have not been given appropriate training yet. The curriculum in SSK for class I-III is the same as in primary schools. In one SSK, the quality of teaching seems even better than in the primary school. Some parents from a nearby village with primary school send their children to the SSK as opposed to the local primary school. The other SSK runs less well. One teacher does not seem to be under pressure of the managing committee as her husband is heading the same. She sometimes “sub-contracts” her job to a younger woman.

Officially, the EOSE and panchayat Karmadhyaksha Education are also responsible for inspections at the SSK. The managing sends attendance reports, etc. to the EOSE. However, it seems that the control of the managing committee is stronger than the one of government offices or the panchayat.

The questionnaire survey did not give a clear picture of the villagers’ pressure on schools. The villagers generally answered that they have already enough of a say in regard to school matters. However, this may indicate an undeveloped sense of ownership rather than satisfaction with education or a lack of power over local school affairs. As most of them are illiterate or semi-literate, poor villagers probably find it difficult to assess the quality of teaching. As the headmaster is a respected person, he can also not be criticised openly.

#### 4.3.5 Curriculum

This sub-section does not provide an analysis of the school curriculum, but only highlights the problem in some parts of the language of instruction. In Santhal villages in Old Malda, children are not always familiar with Bengali. Some of them drop out because teachers teach only in Bengali. The children feel embarrassed when they do not understand. A local school secretary, in collaboration with the headmaster, has been trying to have tribal teachers appointed here.

Villagers did not mention that school curricula would be inappropriate for the local (rural) context, but we did not probe sufficiently into this topic to make any inferences. Generally, villagers, many of them illiterate or neo-literate, do not feel to be in a position to criticize the school curriculum (or the teachers).



#### 4.3.6 Pedagogy

In both Midnapore and Malda, education officers and teachers were talking about new teaching methods, in particular “joyful learning”. All teachers have been informed about this programme but it has not been implemented in Debra and in Old Malda yet. Neither were there specific continued education courses for teachers on this topic. In the schools visited in Debra, it was obvious that the shortage of teachers had negative impacts on the quality of education. We have observed a headmaster struggling with four classes at the same time. (His colleague was away in a teaching course.) Teaching seemed monotonous and focused on learning by heart and reciting of schoolbook texts. In Ma-PS-1 in Old Malda, the pedagogy practiced could not be assessed because during all our visits teaching was not going on. Rather, the teachers were busy reading the newspapers on the veranda of the school.

The Left Front Government replaced the pass-mark system in primary schools with the no-retention system in which pupils are promoted to the next class irrespective of their grades. The idea was not to encourage weak students and to reduce dropout rates. However, the teachers implemented this policy only partly. In particular, they have not been serious in paying special attention to weaker students so as to bring them up to the levels of their co-students. Now, the teachers lament that they have lost an effective instrument of putting pressure on students. Teachers and parents blame this policy for the deterioration of education.

In the present system of “continuous assessment”, teachers should assess the students’ progress every 3-6 months and organize individual parent-teacher meetings. In Old Malda, teachers did not seem to make the guardians aware of this system. (Ma 203) This leads to further mistrust between the villagers and the teachers.

Furthermore, many interviewees have mentioned the social environment is detrimental to spreading education in Malda district. “The well-to-do want to keep the some people illiterate. Otherwise they won’t be capable of continuing the exploitation of them.” The middle class is not willing to help the poor. On the other hand, the poor nowadays see that others have a high standard of living. In Malda, the economic disparities have grown very much in the past years. The growing class division between the poor and the middle class has reduced co-operation. In regard to school matters, this is very visible: Earlier villagers donated for school buildings; today there is no such solidarity anymore. “Now it’s just ‘give and take’. Everybody asks what the benefit is for himself/herself,” says one government officer. The poor in turn are suspicious of the middle class, including the teachers and the SI. They question the

motives of their intervention. So, there is also no co-operation of the masses for spreading education.

Finally, there is no political will for improving education levels in Malda. A very few people who are influential and powerful are not interested in making the masses educated. Most panchayat members are not interested in working for better education as no money can be made like in development projects.

The teachers are no exception of the attitudes of the middle class. They have not internalised moral imperatives for teaching well. And there are no individual rewards for good teaching. The teachers are therefore more interested in making additional money with their own business.

#### **4.4 Awareness-Raising**

The state attempts to raise awareness about the benefits of education, particularly among rural poor parents. This is done with the assumption that lack of awareness is, at least partly, responsible for low school enrolment and low retention rates among poorer sections and SC/ST populations. Educational access for girls seems to be paid less attention; the research did not come across specific measures to increase the enrolment of girls, except for the distribution of dresses for school-going tribal girls in Debra.

##### 4.4.1 Stereotypical problem analyses in Malda

While it is laudable to try and motivate social groups and classes that have been excluded from education for decades to send their children to school, the emphasis on awareness-raising reflects a deficient analysis of the reasons poor households have for not sending their girls and boys to school – i.e., livelihood dynamics are neglected (see Ch. 3.4). This emphasis also reflects perceptions and stereotypes about the poor and especially SC/ST among middle classes, including those who are directly involved in the education system.

This has been particularly apparent in Malda. Teachers there invariably put the blame for Malda's dismal performance in the education sector on disinterested children and illiterate parents (Ma T201) who fail to give proper guidance to their children as they are also frequently drunk (Ma V201). Guardians of the *Malpahariya* community were singled-out as particularly deficient. (A BDO posted elsewhere in West Bengal rather blatantly explained Malda's poor educational performance with the high proportion of Muslim population – a factor that is absolutely irrelevant for our studied non-Muslim villages.)

*Panchayat* officials at all levels and education officials share the teachers' perception of low awareness of education among the poor and illiterate (see Ma G201, Ma 204, Ma 201, Ma 202). Rather remarkable were the comments of the Chairperson of Malda's District Primary School Council (DPSC). He explained poor educational achievements with Malda's traditional mango-based economy that would have facilitated a "lazy way of life" as well as indifference to the values of education, because people had always been able to earn a secure income from the mango gardens irrespective of personal educational achievements. Although only a small elite could

afford to lie idle under mango trees, if at all, the Chairperson insisted that “darkness attracts darkness” (Ma 201) and that the indifference in regard to education would have spread to all classes. In his Marxist-materialist interpretation, industrialisation is prerequisite for the spread of education and the success of educational programmes (Ma 201). Such a view is of course cynical when it comes from the person in charge of primary education in the district. This view is also incorrect. Our research with poor villagers may confirm that economics, or more precisely livelihoods patterns, influence people’s interest in education. But the village interviews also suggest very strongly that Malda with its many casual wage labourers is at a “stage” where the poor value education highly for economic reasons (if its quality were satisfactory) (see Ch. 3.4).

#### 4.4.2 The role of School Attendance Committees

Whatever the influence of livelihood patterns on interest in education is, West Bengal’s government has tried to spread awareness of education through formal institutions, particularly through the School Attendance Committees, more recently through the *panchayats* and less directly through the teacher unions, the adult-literacy programmes and the child development centres (*angawadi*).

School Attendance Committees (SAC) for primary schools were introduced in 1978 by the newly elected Left Front Government. We found huge regional variation in the composition, function and effectiveness of these committees. In Debra, the committees comprised the headmaster of the respective school as secretary, the *gram panchayat* member of the respective ward as the chairperson, the Sub-Inspector of Primary Schools (SI), as well as two educated villagers and eight guardians as non-ex-officio members. The 13-member committees meet six times a year and are selected by the annual parents’ meetings. The SAC in Debra block played an important role in spreading awareness on education; their members made an effort to go from house to house to motivate parents to send their children to school.

By contrast, the SACs for the studied primary schools in Old Malda were defunct at the time of our study. They had been rejuvenated last in the late-1980s by the respective headmasters who were probably acting on directives from the Department of Education. But in 1999/2000 we found no current guardians of school-going children involved in the SACs – indeed, many official members had passed away. Chairpersons and secretaries were at least identifiable. The school secretaries, on request of the respective headmaster, were to sign the student-attendance register, but they were nothing more than a rubber stamp. The chairperson of Ma-PS-1 admitted that he is not really involved with the committee anymore and that meetings have become irregular during the past few years. He was more committed to his chairpersonship in a nearby Junior High School, where his son was studying. *Panchayat* members and school secretaries indicated that they intend to newly elect and revive the SACs. (This may be due to an order of the DI and in relation to the introduction of DPEP in the district.)

The SACs in Old Malda, or the school secretaries respectively, undertook no concerted effort to raise people’s awareness of education. The Secretary of Ma-PS-1 failed to motivate his fellow villagers in a systematic way, and made a remarkable comment: “If the quality was better, I would see a point in encouraging the parents to send their children to school.” (Ma V201)

#### 4.4.3 The role of panchayats

The district-level *panchayat* Standing Committee on Education in Malda claims to have directed the lower-tier *panchayats* to make an effort to convince guardians of the usefulness of their children's education (Ma 204). These directives, if given at all, had little impact in the studied villages. Local *panchayat* members occasionally urged the headmasters to hold guardians' meetings twice a year. But these meetings were still not held. The *panchayats* haven't engaged visibly in motivating parents and children for education. It was suggested that in some areas of Malda district, *panchayat* members from lower classes were increasingly engaged in spreading awareness on education (Ma 201). However, it must be suspected that the engagement of *panchayat* members will depend on whether they have to rely on the state school system or whether they can afford to send their children to private schools thanks to new sources of income accruing through their public office. Apart from the inactivity of the *panchayats* in the studied villages, we also did not find any evidence of teacher union activity in regard to organizing meetings and campaigns for awareness-raising, as it had been claimed by union leaders of the ABPTA.

#### 4.4.4 Total Literacy Campaign, Integrated Child Development Scheme and Midday Meal Scheme

Adult literacy programmes bear an effect on awareness of the value of education, and tend to motivate parents to provide some education to their children. Table 20 in Ch. 3.4 shows that parents with some education are much more likely to send their children to school (yet these figures may also be correlated to poverty levels and caste categories).

In Debra, the Total Literacy Campaign (TLC) was very successful; it created many neoliterates, who are generally aware of the benefits of education. However, when asked about these benefits, villagers often gave stereotypical answers (e.g., education allows us to participate in society) that may have been learned by heart in programmes.

In Malda, the Total Literacy Campaign (TLC) has failed completely. In the current phase III of the programme, only two adult-literacy were running in the studied *gram panchayat*. The two centres taught no more 22 people, all of whom were men. (The block-level EOSE doubted even these figures that have been provided by the *Pradhan*.) In the studied villages, we didn't find anyone who has become neoliterate thanks to the TLC. The campaigns failed because of the non-cooperation of teachers and *panchayat* members, and they were disrupted by the area's recurrent floods (Ma B203). Textbooks and kerosene lamps for the evening classes often did not reach the centres. Without the prospect of adequate remuneration, it was also difficult to find sufficiently skilled volunteers in the locality (Ma V202)

*Angawadi* under the Integrated Child Development Scheme, apart from improving the nutrition of children below schooling age, could also have a positive impact on school enrolment and retention. Children would develop the habit of going to school (Ma V202). One *angawadi* was running in Village J (Old Malda); in Debra block, one centre was being built about 5km away from the studied villages. We didn't look into the *angawadi* specifically.

Apart from initiatives to raise awareness for education, the Midday-Meal Scheme (MMS) could have been used to create incentives for going to school. School Secretaries as well as teachers in Malda were of the opinion that an intensified MMS would be an important, if not the only, way to increase school enrolment and attendance. In reality, however, the MMS is weakly linked to regular school attendance. Unlike the name of the scheme may suggest, children are not provided with a (cooked) lunch at school. Rather, rice grains are distributed every three months – the distribution has recently become more irregular; i.e., every five to six months. Each pupil who went to school for 20 days per month is supposed to get the portion. However, some children in Old Malda are sent to school specifically on the days when rice is due for distribution, and the teachers and SAC members find it difficult to leave out these, often very poor families, from the distribution. In order to avoid tumult, even families without school-going children are sometimes given food grains. At the local level, the MMS has been distorted from an incentive for education to government food relief.

If the MMS was intended as a carrot, the proposed fines for non-enrolment and non-attendance would be the government's stick to achieve better achievements in primary education. Making primary schooling mandatory and fining "delinquent" parents have been debated since Independence. The idea had a recent revival, and fines of up to Rs. 500 are proposed. However, social and political realities would render the enforcement of such a law very difficult. An otherwise active and committed School Secretary in Old Malda expressed to be scared of enforcing such a rule. He understands the economic situation of his fellow (tribal) villagers. Furthermore, most of the poor villagers are CPI(M) supporters, and as a party worker is would be unable to fine his comrades without losing all his social and political credibility (Ma V202).

#### 4.4.5 Informal spread of awareness

Apart from formal programs, awareness raising often takes in more informal and personalized ways. In Debra block, for instance, Adivasi populations seem to have been imitating practices of general caste Hindus, including sending the children to school.

While formal initiatives, campaigns and programs related to education were ineffective in Malda, if they were carried out at all, people's awareness of potential benefits from education were also spread in informal ways. First the *Santhali*, and more recently the *Malpahariya*, started to send their children to school as they saw this practice from other communities, as well as from the emerging elite (e.g., panchayat members and political brokers) within their own communities. Education is seen more and more necessary for improving job opportunities (in the expanding non-farm sector) and as a way of reducing the risk of being cheated by employers and officials (see Ch. 3.3).

Unlike in Debra, the existing middle class (mostly general caste Hindus) refrained from proactively encouraging the lower classes and castes to pursue an education. Many interviewees alleged that the opposite would be the case, and that the middle classes are interested in keeping levels of awareness and education low. Education officials lamented:

The well-to-do want to keep the other people illiterate. Otherwise they won't be capable of continuing the exploitation of them. (Ma B201)

The educated people are not interested in educating the villagers. They don't want others to become empowered and compete with them. (Ma B203)

The DPSC Chairperson put it in similar words:

The educated people here do not want others to be educated. They are afraid of losing the leadership in the society. But the dedication of educated people would be needed to improve the situation. (Ma 201)

The class divide in Malda district, especially near the urban areas, appears to be growing very rapidly. Small businesspeople have become fairly rich recently, some of them perhaps also thanks to illegal border trade. The growing class division, as well as the spread of individualism and consumerism, have reduced co-operation and solidarity, including in the matter of education:

Earlier villagers donated for school buildings. Today there is no such solidarity anymore. Now it's just 'give and take'. Everybody asks what the benefit is for himself or herself. The poor in turn are suspicious of the middle class, including the teachers and the SI [Sub-Inspector of Schools]. They question the motives of their intervention. So, there is also no co-operation of the masses for spreading education. (Ma B201)

The notion of past village solidarity is perhaps romanticised, and the middle classes nowadays take the "exit option" of sending their children to private schools instead of providing school infrastructure, which in the past was mainly used by their fellow general caste Hindu villagers anyhow. Education (of poorer sections) is rarely seen as a public good, but rather as a good to improve the economic or social position of the family. It may also not help that, because of the pay reforms, the state-employed primary schoolteachers find themselves on the other side of the class divide than the children of poor households they teach (see also Sen 2002<sup>9</sup>). As middle-class businesspeople or officials, many primary schoolteachers are able to opt out from state primary education for their children.

Politicians in Malda don't seem to have attempted to reverse these trends. There has been little political will to create demand for education. Some government officers suggested that this was because the education sector provides less scope for "profits" for politicians and panchayat members than "development projects" (Ma B201, Ma B203). Also, politicians can perhaps only gain from an uneducated and thus more manipulate-able population. This proposition was not refuted by the DPSC Chairperson who laughed and said: "How do you expect me to say something on this. I'm also a political man." (Ma 201).

As an earlier quote indicated, the growing class divide also creates suspicion among the poor. Outsiders, including government officers or researchers, are not trusted even if they may have good intentions. Initially, our research team was often accused of being in the village for their own personal benefit. Education officials have also experienced such attitudes (see Ma 201, Ma B201) that make work in the village, including awareness-raising, quite a challenge.

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<sup>9</sup> Sen, Amartya (2002) Introduction: The Delivery of Primary Education: A Study in West Bengal, *The Pratichi Education Report*, No. 1, pp. 1-12.