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**Educational deprivation and primary school provision:
a study of providers in the city of Calcutta**

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Summary

Publicly provided education systems are increasingly being seen as unable to address the specific educational needs of poor and marginalized groups. The emphasis on pluralism in educational provision and alternative schooling systems for such groups hence assumes significance. This paper focuses on the education of the poor in the city of Calcutta, capital of the state of West Bengal in India. It dwells on initiatives that are underway to bring all children to primary schools both in state funded regular schools as well as in alternative schools that are being run by non-government organisations. The paper situates these initiatives in the larger context of the state of primary schooling in the city and the perceptions of educational deprivation among policy-makers, teachers and administrators. It points to the fact that primary schools are inadequate in terms of availability and offer education of relatively poor quality. However educational deprivation is seen by school providers to result largely from poverty, particularly child labour and the absence of home and community environments that are conducive to learning. This has provided the rationale for an alternative schooling system to address the specific educational needs of children who are not in regular schools. The paper acknowledges that poverty is an important constraint in the education of the children of Calcutta's poor. However it stresses that an emphasis primarily on the linkages between poverty, child labour and non enrolment in school fails to address the magnitude of educational deprivation that results from the institutional context of schooling provided to the poor. While the alternative schooling system may increase educational opportunities for poor children it is unlikely to provide education of quality. On the other hand it is likely to result in a further stratification of an already iniquitous schooling system.

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Abbreviations

AIE	Alternative and Innovative Education
AIES	All India Education Survey
AP	Anandapath
APD	Assistant Project Director
AS	Alternative Schools
BBWS	Bikas Bharati Welfare Society
BC	Bridge Course(s)
BCI	Bridge Course Instructor
BSSL	Bengal Social Service League
CLPOA	City Level Programme of Action
CMC	Calcutta Municipal Corporation
DEO	Deputy Education Officer
DI	Deputy Inspector of Schools
DMC	Deputy Municipal Commissioner
DPEP	District Primary Education Programme
DPSC	District Primary School Council
EGS	Education Guarantee Scheme
FOCUS	Forum of Communities United in Service
GOWB	Government of West Bengal
IPER	Institute of Psychological and Educational Research
JBT	Junior Basic Training
LDS	Loretto Day School
LFG	Left Front Government
NCAER/HDI	National Council of Applied Economic Research/Human Development Index
NCERT	National Council of Educational Research and Training.
NFE	Non Formal Education
NGO	Non government organisation
PA	Private Aided
PMU	Project Management Unit
PTT	Primary Teachers Training
PUA	Private Unaided.
RC	Resource Centre
SC	Scheduled Caste
SDP	State Domestic Product
SPD	State Project Director

SRGEDUC	State Resource Group on Education of Deprived Urban Children (Also referred to as SRG)
SS	Shikshalaya
SSA	Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan
SSK	Shishu Shiksha Kendra/Child Education Centre
SSP	Shikshalaya Prakalpa
ST	Scheduled Tribe
SWC	School Welfare Committee
TA	Teacher Association
TAR	Teacher Association Representative
TPR	Teacher-Pupil Ratio
UEE	Universal Elementary Education
UPE	Universal Primary Education
WBBPE	West Bengal Board of Primary Education

1 Introduction

In recent years there has been increasing policy and research concern with the nature of educational provision for poor and marginalised groups. It is no longer expected that publicly provided education systems would be able to ensure that all children receive even the minimum level of primary education, acknowledged as the right of every child. This is not merely because state funded systems of education are seen to have become inefficient and bureaucratic structures make them an easy target of economic reforms, but also that they are unable to address what are perceived as the specific educational needs of the poor. On the other hand, it is being increasingly advocated that pluralism in institutional provision will bring in multiple actors, particularly civil society organisations and local communities that are likely to be better equipped to cater to these needs. In this context, the understanding of educational deprivation by institutional actors assumes importance as it is likely to influence the manner in which they interpret the educational needs of the poor and thereby the education they receive. This shift in educational discourse raises larger concerns of equity that need to be addressed.

This paper focuses on educational provision for the poor in the city of Calcutta¹ in the state of West Bengal in India. The city is of interest in that it is the capital of a state that has implemented significant pro-poor programmes. Over the last three years a number of initiatives have been undertaken to bring all children to school in the city as part of a statewide effort to universalise primary education by the year 2003. While efforts are on to gear up publicly funded schools, there has also been a city level initiative to provide education to poor children by setting up “alternative schools” (AS) for them. Alternative schools are a major component of present day government sponsored educational programmes that target educationally deprived sections of Indian society. Flexible structures, sensitivity to local educational needs, as well as cost effectiveness, are some of the professed characteristics of the alternative school programme.² In Calcutta the AS programme is being implemented by non-government organisations. Calcutta thus offers an opportunity to study a strategy of pluralism in school provision for the poor, in the state funded school system as well as in alternative schools run by non government organisations (NGOs). The paper aims to do the following:³

- Analyse the context of educational deprivation in West Bengal.
- Understand the nature of access that poor children have to regular primary education in the city of Calcutta and the quality of schooling made available to them.

¹ Calcutta has been renamed Kolkata. In this paper I continue to call the city Calcutta.

² A number of major educational programmes implemented in the 1990s have a significant “alternative school” component. These include the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), the programme of Alternative and Innovative Education (AIE) based on the Education Guarantee Scheme of the state of Madhya Pradesh, and the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), initiated at the close of the 1990s. The AS employs local youth as “para teachers” on contract at lower salaries than regular government school teachers. Norms regarding minimum educational qualifications of para teachers and their professional training are also lower than that for regular teachers.

³ This study of provision of education for the poor in Calcutta forms part of a larger research project on *Child Labour, Social Exclusion and Household Livelihoods: Meeting Children’s Interests in Situations of Inequality in India and Bangladesh*. The research project is part of the South Asian component of the Social Policy Programme of the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex, UK.

- Explore how policy-makers, school administrators and teachers understand educational deprivation and the manner in which they interpret the educational needs of the poor.
- Briefly study the alternative schools programme in order to explore how it is likely to address issues that underlie educational deprivation.

In addition to secondary data from available surveys, relevant reports and research studies, the paper draws on the following:

- A brief survey of 11 primary schools catering to three slums in the city.⁴ These are state government funded and managed by local bodies.
- Interviews with teachers, school administrators and other officials.
- Interviews with key actors in the alternative schools programme initiated in Calcutta: NGOs, teachers, administrators etc.⁵

The discussion that follows is divided into four sections. Section 2 sets out the context of educational deprivation in West Bengal, highlighting in particular the experience of the state since the Left Front Government (LFG) has been in power. Section 3 focuses on schooling for the poor in the city of Calcutta, dwelling on the state funded system of primary schooling. The AS programme to bring “urban deprived children” to school is discussed in Section 4. It looks at the magnitude of the task that is being undertaken and the early experiences of NGOs in implementing the programme. Section 5 presents a brief summary and the main conclusions of the discussion.

⁴ These schools were deliberately chosen as they cater to the slums of Dhobiatala, Dharapara and Suarbarhi where household surveys for the larger project (mentioned in the earlier end note) were carried out. A private primary school and two coaching (remedial education) centres run by NGOs were also visited. The survey of schools was carried out in October 2000 and is referred to as School Survey (2000).

⁵ Interviews were carried out in October 2000 and September 2001. Data from the interviews is referenced in the text giving the person/organisation spoken with, as well as the year in which the interview was carried out (2000 or 2001). See Annex.

2 The context of educational deprivation in West Bengal

In 1977, a coalition of “left” parties came to power in the state of West Bengal with the promise of a radical change in the political and economic situation in the state. The previous three decades were characterised by economic decline with low productivity of agriculture and stagnation in the non-agricultural sector.⁶ In addition, the state bore the brunt of the partition of India on the eastern side and the Bangladesh war in 1971. These two events brought a large number of refugees into West Bengal placing the resources of the state and existing infrastructure and facilities under extreme strain. Politically also, West Bengal witnessed considerable turmoil especially in the late 1960s and 1970s.

The LFG implemented a radical economic agenda reflected in the far-reaching reforms carried out in rural areas in terms of redistribution of land to the rural poor and ensuring of tenancy rights to share croppers as well as minimum wages to labour. It also institutionalised decentralised structures of local self-government through panchayati raj institutions, and encouraged popular participation in development. This stimulated agricultural production and reduced rural poverty ratios especially in rural West Bengal. Between 1977 and 1991, as many as 1.5 million rural households benefited from the implementation of land ceiling laws in West Bengal. Over half the beneficiaries belonged to traditionally deprived social groups such as *dalits* and *adivasis*⁷ (Sengupta and Gazdar 1996: 144–5). The growth rate in food grain production was an impressive 4.6 per cent between 1978 and 1991 as compared to an average of 2.8 per cent for the country as a whole (Ibid: 163). More importantly, the percentage of the poor in rural West Bengal declined from 68.3 per cent in 1977–8 to around 40.8 per cent in 1993–94. (For rural India, the decline was slower: from 53.1 per cent to 37.3 per cent during this period.)⁸ The thrust of the LFG was largely towards the rural areas of the state and urban West Bengal has suffered in comparison. Sengupta and Gazdar observe that ‘In 1960–1, nearly 23 per cent of India’s industrial output was produced in West Bengal. This fell to about 10 per cent in 1980–1, and to under 7 per cent by the end of the eighties’ (1996: 130). Though urban poverty ratios have also fallen and are lower than that for the country as a whole, the decline has been less sharp than in rural West Bengal. The percentage of poor in urban areas fell by 15.8 percentage points (from 38.2 per cent to 22.4 per cent) between 1977–8 and 1993–4 in comparison to a decline of 27.5 percentage points in rural West Bengal during this period (Chatterjee 1998: 3005).

Given the significant achievements of the LFG in improving the economic conditions of the poor (particularly in rural areas) it is surprising that West Bengal has performed relatively poorly in the sphere of elementary education. In fact until the 1980s West Bengal was considered an educationally backward state. In 1983, attendance rates for rural boys in the 5–9 year primary school going age group were dismally low (40.8 per cent as compared to 45.6 per cent for the country as a whole). For girls, the attendance rate in rural West Bengal just equaled the all India figure, around 36 per cent

⁶ Sengupta and Gazdar observe that ‘the economic situation at the time of takeover by the LFG in 1977 was characterized by extremely high rates of rural poverty, stagnation in agriculture, relative decline in non-agricultural sectors . . .’ (1996: 132).

⁷ *Dalits* and *adivasis* comprise 30 per cent of the population of West Bengal and 34.5 per cent of the population in rural areas. Muslims account for 21.8 per cent of the population of the state (IIPS 2001).

⁸ The percentage of poor (as per the “Modified Expert Group Methodology”) is cited in Chatterjee (1998: 3005).

(cited in REC 1992: 135–6). Though school attendance rates have increased in the decade of the 1990s, the proportion of out-of-school children remains significantly large. As seen in Table 2.1, even in 1998–9 after two decades of LFG rule, school attendance rates were only marginally higher for the 6–10 year age group in West Bengal (82.9 per cent) as compared to the all India average of 81.9 per cent. However primary school completion rates as well as overall attendance rates in the 11–14 year age group continue to be below national averages.⁹ Inter-state comparisons starkly reveal West Bengal’s position in relation to other states in India. Summary figures given for 1998–99 show that West Bengal, with school attendance rates of around 71 per cent for children in the 6–17 year age group, ranks sixth from below among 25 Indian states. It is barely ahead of known poor performers such as Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh that have around 70 per cent school attendance rates for the same year. The performance of Himachal Pradesh and Kerala (with 94 per cent and 91 per cent of 6–17 year olds in school respectively) is striking in contrast (IIPS 2000: 33).

Table 2.1 Rates of age specific school attendance and primary school completion West Bengal, Calcutta, India: 1998–9

Age Group	West Bengal			Calcutta	India		
	Rural	Urban	Total	Total	Rural	Urban	Total
<i>6–10 years</i>							
All	81.8	88.1	82.9	87.7	79.3	90.4	81.9
Male	82.8	88.2	83.7	88.0	83.2	91.7	85.2
Female	80.8	87.9	82.1	87.3	75.1	89.1	78.3
<i>11–14 years</i>							
All	71.0	76.6	72.2	86.8	70.4	84.0	73.9
Male	74.6	78.5	75.4	86.5	78.5	85.1	80.2
Female	66.9	74.9	68.7	87.1	61.6	82.8	67.0
<i>6–14 years</i>							
All	77.4	82.9	78.5	87.3	75.7	87.6	78.6
Male	79.4	83.8	80.2	87.4	81.4	88.7	83.1
Female	75.3	82.0	76.7	87.2	69.7	86.3	73.7
<i>Primary school* completion rates</i>	14.9	16.5	15.4	N.A.	15.9	18.1	16.5

Source: IIPS (2000; 2001) National Family Health Survey (NFHS–2) West Bengal and India.

* For population of 6 years and above.

N.A. Not available

⁹ Total literacy rates in West Bengal in 2001 (60.2 per cent for women and 77.6 per cent for men), were higher than the all India average (54.2 per cent for women and 75.9 per cent for men). Between 1991 and 2001, the increase in the rate of literacy in the state (by 11.5 percentage points) was lower than that in the rest of the country (by 13.2 percentage points) during this period.

Economic, social and regional disparities characterise educational deprivation in West Bengal. Data from the National Council of Applied Economic Research/Human Development Index (NCAER/HDI) survey carried out in 1994 provides some idea of “ever enrolment rates”¹⁰ in the 6–14 year age group, across rural households classified according to economic status and social group to which they belonged. In rural Bengal “ever enrolment rates” for males in the 6–14 year age group varied from around 56.1 per cent in households with an annual per capita income of less than Rs. 1,500 to around 75 per cent and above where it was Rs. 4,000 and more. Similar variations could be seen across households categorised according to land ownership. Ever enrolment rates among males in landless wage earner (51 per cent) and marginal land holder (67.3 per cent) groups were far lower than among large land owners (100 per cent). Social groups such as *dalits*, tribes and Muslims had a larger proportion of children who have never been to school as compared to the Hindus (other than *dalits*). Ever enrolment rates ranged from 57.2 per cent for Muslim boys to 66.8 per cent for Scheduled Caste (SC) and 78.8 per cent for males from other Hindu castes (Shariff and Sudarshan 1996: 97).

Gender disparities in ever enrolment rates are surprisingly small in West Bengal. As seen in Table 2.1, school attendance rates varied by less than 2 per cent between boys and girls in the 6–10 year age group in 1998–9. What is also significant is the far greater spread of schooling among girls relative to boys in the decade of the 1990s than in earlier years. This is reflected in the significantly lower school attendance rates among girls and sharper gender disparities in the 11–14 year age group as compared to the younger group of 6–10 years. Not surprisingly, children in urban West Bengal have availed of education to a larger extent than in rural areas. Around 88 per cent of children in the 6–10 year age group were attending schools in urban West Bengal as compared to 82 per cent in rural areas in 1998–9. However urban-rural differences are less sharp than is usually the case because urban West Bengal has performed relatively poorly (See Table 2.1).

Why has the state of West Bengal failed to achieve even universal primary education? At the outset it must be mentioned that a number of factors influence inter state variations in educational outcomes in India. At a macro level the federal framework laid down in the Constitution governs the relations between the centre (union government) and the states (provincial governments) in the sphere of education.¹¹ The centre has played a dominant role within the educational sphere by laying down policy frameworks and funding what are called “centrally sponsored” schemes and programmes. States are constrained by lack of adequate funds for education and hence are obliged to accept such programmes for the development of

¹⁰ Ever enrolment rate is the percentage of children aged 6–14 years who were enrolled in schools at any point of time (Shariff and Sudarshan 1996: 47).

¹¹ Until the mid 1970s, school education was the primary responsibility of states, while that of technical and higher education was vested with the centre. The 42nd amendment to the Indian Constitution in 1976 brought school education on to the concurrent list, wherein it became the responsibility of the central and state governments. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional amendments provide an enabling framework for decentralised management of primary schooling by democratically elected local bodies (panchayat and municipalities).

education.¹² Thus centre-state relations influence educational policies and programmes at the level of states. More important are factors that shape the actual implementation of educational programmes within individual states. These include the historical context in which education has developed in the state (the colonial experience, early educational developments, institutional arrangements and so on) as well as the nature of social structure (caste and gender relations). The ideology of successive state governments, their policy perspectives, as well as the specific allocation of resources, provide the larger context in which programmes of education are implemented and how different groups respond to them. Thus, the differential educational performance of West Bengal among states within India must be seen as a result of complex processes that come into play as education policy is mediated through economic, political and social structure and the institutional context of school provision. The manner in which institutional actors within the educational domain (policy-makers, school administrators, teachers and so on) interpret the needs of children (and parents) is also important as it influences the nature of educational provision and thereby children's schooling within specific contexts.

At a broad policy level, the LFG has been criticised for its 'failure to provide the same thrust to the social sector as it did in the case of agrarian reform and democratic decentralisation'. Sengupta and Gazdar observe that 'the near exclusive concern of the Left Front organisations with agrarian politics, and the establishment and redistribution of property rights in land is an important factor in their neglect of individual rights to a minimal level of education and health care' (1996: 98). Acharya points to the structural and cultural roots of educational disadvantage of poor and marginalised groups in the state (Acharya 1989). He traces the historical roots of this disadvantage to the domination of modern/western education by the *Bhadralok* (comprising *Brahman*, *Baniya* and *Baidya* castes who resided mainly in Calcutta and the district towns) from the mid nineteenth century when it was first introduced in the province of Bengal. The *Bhadralok* monopolised western learning, particularly English education, as well as opportunities for jobs in the modern sector that such education provided entry into. As the socially dominant emerging middle classes, the *Bhadralok* were able to shape the structure of educational opportunities and ensure that a sanskritised form of Bengali (and not the colloquial language spoken by the common people) became the language used in schools and that primers evolved for children reflected the cultural ethos of this social group. The formal school became the dominant mode of educational delivery and the indigenous *pathshalas* that served the needs of children in rural Bengal went into decline. For the mass of people who lived in rural areas, the decline of the indigenous *pathshalas* to which they had easy access, as well as the unfamiliar language of instruction and content of education in the new schools were factors that ensured early exclusion from formal education (Ibid). Thus, while literacy rates among

¹² It is important to note that the contribution by the centre to the total educational budgets has been relatively small. In 1996–7, the total expenditure on education in the revised budget was Rs. 4,53,337 million (11.1 per cent of the total budget of the centre and states). Of this, the revised budget of the centre was Rs. 60,511 million (2.6 per cent of the central budget) and that of the states was Rs. 3,92,826 million (19.2 per cent of the budgets for all states). In 1997–8 the total budgeted expenditures for education in the central budget increased to 3.4 per cent (Tilak 2002: 272).

the *Bhadralok* were fairly high (37.3 per cent among the *Brahmans* and 51.7 per cent among the *Baidyas*) in 1931, that among the lowest of castes such as the *Bagdi* and *Bauri* were less than 2 per cent (cited in Ghosh 2001: 48).

The post-independence period saw a rapid spread of primary schools in West Bengal in the first three decades. The number of schools increased threefold from 15,119 in 1951 to 47,940 in 1981 (cited in Acharya 2001: 7). Primary schools comprised only grades I to IV and grade V was attached to upper primary schools. The spread of upper primary schools (grades VI–VII) was extremely limited. Even in 1993, there was only one upper primary school/section for around seven primary schools/sections.¹³ The sharp pyramid-like structure of schooling (far sharper in West Bengal than India as a whole) objectively posed a constraint to the spread of education beyond primary school. More important, it ensured that only a section of children who enrolled in grade I could attain even primary education, given that grade V (the last year of primary education) was attached to the significantly smaller number of upper primary schools/sections.

The system of education continued to be characterised by cultural and structural differentiation. Acharya refers to the “three tier” system that developed in the post-independence period with a ‘few at the top with an elite English schooling, a large group of neo elites in the middle with education in ordinary Bengali schools and the vast majority of illiterate labourers at the bottom’ (Acharya 1987: 71). In a study conducted in four villages in rural West Bengal in 1978, he also showed that enrolment of children was influenced by the location of their families in the agrarian class structure. While 80 to 100 per cent of children belonging to the richer strata (*jotedars* and rich peasants) were enrolled in school, this was so among barely 2 per cent of children from poor peasant families. Poverty and the family’s need for the labour of the child were important factors that constrained school enrolment. In addition, negative attitudes to the education of poor children not only of their parents, but also of the richer strata (who feared the loss of cheap child labour and the resistance of educated workers), were also obstacles to the schooling of the poor (Ibid).

The political unrest in the state referred to earlier also left its mark on the educational system. The Report of the Education Commission of West Bengal (REC), describes the situation in education at the time of the takeover of the LFG as ‘not exactly congenial for serious academic pursuit’ (REC 1992: 5). It goes on to observe that, ‘The decade 1967–7 was marked by political upheavals in the state which severely affected the educational scene . . . the schedule of examinations was thrown totally out of gear; mass copying in examinations was a common feature. Most teachers and other staff – even of schools aided by the government – were without security of tenure; the payment of salaries was often irregular; close to 60 per cent of the population in the state were unlettered . . .’ (1992: 5–6).

¹³ Primary schools refer to independent schools where the highest grade offered is grade IV. Very few primary schools in West Bengal have grade V. Primary sections refer to primary grades that are part of schools that offer other stages of school education. The number of schools/sections gives total availability of that stage of schooling.

The LFG had reform of education on its agenda. The perspective was one of extending democratic rights in education. The objective was to introduce ‘free and compulsory education for all up to middle stage’, ‘eradication of illiteracy’, ‘security of services for teachers and employees in all educational institutions’ and direct payment of their salaries by the state government, the creation of ‘democratically elected School Boards’ and so on (REC 1992: 5). Major policy changes in the structure of governance of education were effected. The government took over privately managed primary schools which were subsequently called “government sponsored free primary schools”. It took responsibility for payment of salaries to teachers in these schools ensuring reasonable salaries and security of tenure to all teachers. At the secondary and higher secondary stage, private management continued, but salaries of teachers and staff were protected by the government.

A distinct feature of primary schooling in West Bengal was the creation of statutory bodies with elected representatives, called the District Primary School Councils (DPSC) and the West Bengal Board of Primary Education (WBBPE) for the management, supervision and control of primary education. Both these bodies were set up in accordance with the Primary Education Act of 1973. While WBBPE was an apex body, DPSC functioned at the district level. Unlike many other states, panchayats were not involved in the management of education. Elections to the DPSC were delayed for almost two decades and were only held in 2000. Thus they remained nominated rather than elected bodies since their inception.

Efforts were also made to make education, in terms of its content and language of instruction, more suitable to the ‘needs of first generation learners’ (Basu *et al.* 1997: 126–7). In 1979, on the recommendation of an officially constituted syllabus committee, the primer Sahaj Path (written by Tagore) was withdrawn as the prescribed text for grades I and II. Further, English was removed as a second language in order to ‘lighten the burden of learners and allow them to have a good grounding in the first language at the primary stage’ (Ibid 127). However both actions were met with considerable opposition. The urban middle classes saw the removal of Sahaj Path as an affront to their culture, and the resistance it encountered forced the government to retain the text. Given the growing pressure for English to be taught in primary school, it was reintroduced as a language of study from grade III. Acharya calls these efforts at reform of the LFG “piecemeal”, as they failed to address either pedagogical or structural issues that constrained the spread of education (Acharya 1987: 77–8).

Poverty has been seen as a major factor underlying educational deprivation and a significant thrust of policy has been to subsidise the costs of schooling. Education has been made tuition free not only at the primary stage, but up to the higher secondary stage of schooling¹⁴. In addition there has been an emphasis on providing incentives such as free textbooks and uniforms as well as mid-day meals. The All India Education Survey (AIES) in 1993 indicates that other than for textbooks, incentives were limited in terms of coverage of schools. In 1993 an estimated 82.2 per cent of primary schools were covered by the free text book scheme. However free uniforms reached only 33.0 per cent and mid-day meals less than 2 per cent of primary schools in the state (NCERT 1998a: 315–21).

¹⁴ School fees are charged under different heads: tuition, development, sports, library, examinations and so on. Schools funded/aided by the state government do not charge tuition fees.

One of the major constraints that West Bengal has faced is inadequate resources for education in general and primary education in particular. The REC points to a ‘phenomenal increase’ in public resources allocated for education after 1977 and observes that ‘non-plan outlay registered a ten-fold increase between 1976–7 and 1991–2’ (1992: 6). However it must be remembered that resource allocation for education was itself extremely small prior to the late 1970s. In terms of the share of education in the state domestic product (SDP) the increase has only been from 2.6 per cent in 1960–1 to 2.9 per cent in 1980–1 and 5.4 per cent in 1990–1. It declined to an estimated 3.5 per cent in 1995–6. Though the share of allocation to education in the total state budget (revenue account) in 1995–6 was higher for West Bengal (24.3 per cent) than the all India average for states (20.7 per cent), the per capita budgeted expenditure on education (revenue account) was only Rs. 275.60 in comparison to the all India average of Rs. 405.36 in the same year. Further, the share of elementary education in the SDP of the state was less than 1.5 per cent (figures taken from Tilak: 2002). In 1999, 35 per cent of the total public expenditure on general education was allocated to primary education and 47.9 per cent to the secondary stage (Reddy 1999: 28).¹⁵ What is also important is that salaries have comprised the major proportion of primary school expenditure. In 1991 for instance, salaries accounted for 94.5 per cent of primary school expenditure which meant that only a relatively negligible amount was spent on school construction and repairs (0.3 per cent), teacher training (0.5 per cent) etc. (Ibid: 36). This has had serious implications for the construction and maintenance of schools, provision of facilities including educational aids, teacher training, and so on.

The growth in the number of primary schools in the 1980s and 1990s was slow compared to previous decades. In fact Acharya shows that the rate of growth of primary schools was 35.1 per cent between 1971 and 1981 but declined to 6.0 in the next 10 years and further fell to 3.07 per cent between 1991 and 1999 (Acharya 2001: 7). In 1993, only 61.2 per cent of rural children had primary schools/sections within their habitations, while the all India average for children who had this facility within their habitations was 77.8 per cent (NCERT 1997: 28–9). Barely 14.2 per cent of the rural population had upper primary schools/sections located within their habitations (NCERT 1997: 46–7).¹⁶

A large proportion of primary schools lacked “*pucca*” (concrete) buildings and minimum facilities. In 1993 for instance, only 37.2 per cent of primary schools in the state had “*pucca*” buildings, and 40.3 per cent had either one or no room for instructional purposes. Only 59.5 per cent had drinking water facilities, 22.1 per cent had urinals and a negligible 5.5 per cent had separate urinal facilities for girls. (The availability of some of these minimum conveniences was far greater on average for the country as a whole) (NCERT 1998). Further, the most basic teaching aid used in schools, i.e. the blackboard was available in only 59.8 per cent of all primary grades (within independent schools) in West Bengal, and in only 40.4 per cent were there mats/furniture for students (NCERT 1998a: 159). The increase in the number of teachers

¹⁵ Official figures reveal that 92 per cent of primary schools in West Bengal were managed by local bodies while 74–7 per cent of secondary/higher secondary schools were privately managed. However as many as 98.3 per cent of privately managed secondary/higher secondary schools receive government aid in view of the LFG policy to protect the salaries of teachers and staff at all stages of schooling (figures are from NCERT 1998: 14–9).

¹⁶ Here again the all India situation is better as 37.0 per cent of the rural population had access to upper primary schooling within their habitations in 1993 (Ibid).

has also not kept pace with the growing school age population and pupil-teacher ratios increased from 40:1 in 1981–2 to 51:1 in 1999–2000 (Acharya 2001: 7). In fact the absolute number of primary school teachers actually fell from 1, 84,748 in 1991–2 to 1, 50,546 in 1999–2000. These trends indicate the extent of official neglect of primary education in the state and consequently the quality of the learning environment made available for children. It is hence not surprising that competencies attained by children in primary school have been poor. A study of performance of students in Bengali and Mathematics at the end of grade IV conducted in 15 districts in West Bengal found that barely 20 per cent of them obtained ‘the minimum expected score in both subjects’ (Roy *et al.* 1995 cited in World Bank 1997: 84).

Teachers are seen to be partly responsible for the relatively dismal state of schooling. Acharya says that teachers in rural areas are predominantly from the richer agrarian classes¹⁷ and have tended to regard teaching as a remunerative, “subsidiary” occupation that did not require their time and attention as security of tenure was assured by the government. He refers to the practice of *‘pari lagano*, i.e. attending duty by rotation’ wherein teachers attend schools in turns as they substitute for each other (1987: 68). The REC was no doubt obliquely referring to such practices of absenteeism and indifference on the part of teachers when it observed that ‘Many of the problems of irregular attendance and other such undesirable practices on the part of teachers are likely to be tackled once the inspection of schools is both “regular and rigorous” ’ (1992: 44).

An additional factor that is seen to be responsible for the failure of teachers to discharge their role adequately is their involvement in organised party politics. The political resources that teachers commanded as a socially influential group at the village level were recognised by the LFG which drew them quite early on into local leadership. As elected representatives in panchayats and as party functionaries they wield considerable political clout. However, though teachers played an important role in widening the social base of the LFG they became ‘political managers in the process’ (Bhattacharya 2001: 677–8). This is seen to have had deleterious consequences for their role as teachers as is reflected in the recognition (delayed nevertheless) by the LFG of the ‘conflict of interest between the pedagogic and the political responsibilities of the teacher’. Bhattacharya observes that some steps have been initiated to make it difficult for teachers to serve as important functionaries in the panchayat and in party organisations.¹⁸

Teacher associations have been also major political players in the state.¹⁹ The strength of the teacher associations is reflected in the priority that the LFG gave to their demands regarding salaries, security of tenure and other benefits. Further, teacher associations are represented in important organisations such as

¹⁷ There is very little information available on the social background of teachers. The AIES in 1993 indicates that of the teachers in schools in rural West Bengal, 12 per cent belonged to SC, and 2.18 per cent were from ST communities (NCERT 1998b: 45).

¹⁸ For instance Bhattacharya refers to an order issued by the LFG in 1993 wherein ‘All teachers who sought to serve as important functionaries at the block and district levels of the panchayat, were asked in the order to apply for “an extraordinary leave up to five years” from their respective institutions’ (2001: 678). He also makes the point that the LFG realised that teachers by adopting partisan roles, were gradually losing their social credibility that was crucial for the success of the left front programme.

¹⁹ Teachers are usually members of associations that bear allegiance to the major political parties in the state. During his field work in Midnapore in the early 1990s, Bhattacharya found that ‘between 60 to 92.5 per cent’ of the teachers in the villages he visited had joined the teacher association affiliated to the dominant party in the LFG, the CPI (M) (Ibid).

the WBBPE and DPSC. The role of teacher associations in primary education in West Bengal is yet to be studied. There is passing reference to inter associational rivalry having adverse implications for education. An assistant headmaster in Bhattacharya's study observed that 'the rival associations opposed each other out of their political compulsions, and "it is education that takes a beating" ' (2001: 681).

Thus the scenario in primary education until the 1990s does appear relatively depressing. However, the LFG points to the backlog of educational chaos that it inherited when it came to power and to its achievements in restoring 'order and decorum in the education system' (Biswas 1997: XXVIII). It also emphasises the increasing enrolment of children in schools, particularly from poor and deprived groups despite the constraint in resources resulting from the inadequate transfer of funds for education by the central government to the state (Basu *et al.* 1991: 120–69). Since the late 1980s there have been a number of centrally sponsored programmes which have allowed the state to address specific issues in elementary education such as augmenting school facilities (through the operation blackboard programme²⁰), providing incentives for educationally deprived groups including girls and so on. It is interesting that West Bengal was probably the only state to oppose the centrally sponsored Navodaya Vidyalaya programme, a major recommendation of the 1986 National Policy on Education, which it did on ideological grounds. The LFG refused to set up Navodaya Vidyalayas (exclusive model schools to "nurture" talent in rural areas) on the grounds that these schools were elitist. On the other hand, in 1991 the literacy campaign initiated by the National Literacy Mission was implemented with seriousness and made a 'grassroots movement' (Ibid: 122–3). It generated considerable enthusiasm in the rural areas and is seen to have been largely responsible for the significant rise in literacy rates between 1991 and 1998 as well as the growing demand for education among first generation learners in recent years.

The closing years of the twentieth century saw renewed efforts by the state government to achieve universal primary education, which was on the agenda of the LFG when it came to power. The target year is now 2003. In fact, the vision statement of the X Plan states that Universal Elementary Education (UEE) is to be achieved by 2010. A number of programmes are being implemented (largely with central assistance, supplemented with resources from external agencies) with a focus on primary education. These include the DPEP (being implemented since 1997–8 in five districts and extended to another five), Anandapath (the programme of joyful learning) in primary schools, the SSA (in non-DPEP districts), the National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education (mid-day meals), and so on (GOWB 2001: 20).

The LFG has also stated in clear policy terms, its intention to use alternative modes of delivery to provide education to the large section of out-of-school children. It is candid that the task of meeting the growing demand for education is a difficult one, not only because of the constraint in resources but also because of the special needs of children who are now coming to school. As Basu *et al.* observe, the 'system has not acquired the flexibility that is necessary to retain first generation learners' (1997: 122). In rural

²⁰ "Operation Blackboard" was a country-wide programme that was launched by the Government of India in 1987 to provide minimum physical infrastructure, essential learning equipment and at least two teachers to all primary schools that lacked such facilities. It was subsequently extended to upper primary schools as well.

areas the state has begun to set up Shishu Shiksha Kendras (SSK) or Child Education Centres that are provided on community demand to rural habitations that do not have primary schools. The SSK have been brought under the panchayats and are not within the purview of the DPSC as regular primary schools are. In DPEP districts, SSK have been brought under the alternative schooling programme of the DPEP. In 1999–2000, as many as 1,76,075 children were enrolled in 4511 SSK in the nine DPEP districts (GOWB 2001: 46).

A special thrust towards the education of poor children in urban areas has also been envisaged under the West Bengal DPEP. A State Resource Group on the Education of Deprived Urban Children (SRGEDUC henceforth SRG) was formed in 1999, and a programme of alternative schooling called Shikshalaya Prakalpa (SSP) was evolved. NGOs are the main implementing agency of the programme with financial support from the DPEP and the state government. It must be mentioned that involving NGOs as partners in a government programme is also a major shift in education policy and is in line with the currently adopted “pragmatic” approach (Basu *et al.* 1997: 32). The Shikshalaya Prakalpa is being implemented in the city of Calcutta with the involvement of city level NGOs and targets out-of-school children.

3 Primary school provision in Calcutta

3.1 The city and its poor

Calcutta is the core city of India’s largest metropolis and is home to around 4 million people. It is estimated that around 14 million people are in the city every day and in that sense it is more than bursting at its seams. Calcutta is known as a city of migrants.²¹ However, a significant proportion of immigration into the city has resulted from factors such as rural poverty (famines, failure of monsoons and the resulting movement of migrants to the city in search of relief and employment opportunities) as well as political upheavals mentioned earlier.

Historically, Calcutta has had a unique location as the early capital of British India, the seat of education and centre of trade as well as the major metropolis of the colonial period. At the time of independence, Calcutta was considered the “economic capital” of India but over the years the city has gone into decline. The economy has been characterised by industrial stagnation, the adoption of labour-intensive technologies, and a large informal non-factory manufacturing sector which accounts for more than 40 per cent of Calcutta’s labour force. It is in the informal, unorganised sector (which is increasing at a faster rate than the formal sector industries/units) that the urban poor find employment at depressed wage rates and poor working conditions. This sector caters to the local demand for low quality, cheap engineering/consumer goods, provides cheap transport, domestic service and so on (Ghosh 1990: 53). It was estimated that in 1989, over 2 million of the population of Calcutta lived in 2,011 slums across the city. Between 1981 and 1991, the slum population increased from 22 per cent to as much as 48 per cent of

²¹ The percentage of migrants in the Calcutta Urban Agglomeration (that includes the towns around Calcutta city) was around 56 per cent in 1951 and 31.3 per cent in 1981 (cited in Ghosh 1990: 51).

the city's population. In addition there are street and pavement dwellers estimated in 1987 to be around 55,000 persons (Jagannathan and Haldar 1988: 2602).

The city provides extremely inadequate and poor quality basic amenities to its residents. This is most abysmal in the slums and squatter settlements where the poor live. A study describes the living conditions in the slums in the 1980s: 'Each latrine is used by 40 to 50 people a day and each source of water (like a tube well or a tap) by 35 to 45 people. The usual living space for a family of five is 10 to 12 square metres' (Ghosh 1990: 57). Even in 1991 there was an average of only one latrine (toilet) to 45 persons living in the slums (GOI 1991). Income levels are low and a significant proportion of earners are engaged in casual labour and as domestic help. Ghosh observes that rates of illiteracy, malnutrition and infant mortality are very much higher in the slums than in the city as a whole (1990: 57). Muslims and *dalits* (who account for 10.4 per cent and 12.7 per cent of the city's population respectively) are said to comprise a significant proportion of families that reside in the slums.

3.2 Literacy and school participation

The overall literacy rate in 2001 was higher in Calcutta (81.3 per cent) than in the rest of West Bengal (69.2 per cent). However the increase in literacy rate between 1991 and 2001 was smaller for Calcutta (3 percentage points) as compared to that in the state as a whole (11.6 percentage points). In 1998–9, 87.7 per cent of children in the 6–10 year and 86.8 per cent in the 11–14 year age group attended school in the city, as compared to 82.9 per cent and 72.2 per cent respectively in West Bengal as a whole (IIPS 2001) (See Table 2.1). The progress of primary schooling appears to have been extremely slow in the city in the 1990s. As seen in Table 2.1, attendance rates between age groups of children (6–10 years as compared to 11–14 years) have barely improved in Calcutta as compared to the state as a whole (or even urban West Bengal) where a significantly larger proportion of younger children have entered school.²² In 1999, the SRG conducted a survey (henceforth called SRG 1999. Details are given in Cyril 1999) to assess the magnitude of out-of-school children in the city. The survey specifically covered the slums in the 141 administrative wards into which Calcutta is divided and also included pavement dwellers. The survey revealed that the magnitude of educational deprivation among the poor was far greater than that suggested by IIPS (2001) for the city as a whole (see Tables 2.1 and 3.1). Among the 1,82,726 families covered by the SRG survey, 26 per cent of children in the 5–9 year age group and 29 per cent in the 10–14 year age group were not in school. Only 28 per cent of children aged 3–4 years had access to some pre-school facility. Out-of-school children were concentrated in some of the wards of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation. For instance there were as many as 1,000 non-enrolled children in each of 29 wards. In another 25 wards there were 300 children out-of-school (Cyril 1999: 6).

²² As mentioned earlier, among the reasons for increased literacy and school attendance rates in West Bengal in the 1990s have been the literacy campaigns, the DPEP and SSK, all of which have had a rural thrust but are likely to have impacted towns in West Bengal as well.

Table 3.1 Out-of-school children in Calcutta – 1999*

Age group	Total children	No. not in school	% not in school
3-4 yrs	70,465	50,781	72.1
5-9 yrs	1,72,011	44,646	25.9
10-14 yrs	1,72,014	49,518	28.8
Total	4,14,490	1,44,945	34.9

Source: Cyril (1999).

* The details are from the SRG survey (1999) that covered families living in slums and poor settlements as well as on pavements of Calcutta.

3.3 Schools in Calcutta: a profile

Official statistics fail to provide a clear picture of the extent of educational provision as well as the structure of schooling in Calcutta. According to the annual report of the state Department of School Education, there were 1,435 primary schools in the city in 1999 (GOWB 2000: 25). However, enquiries from the two local bodies that manage primary schools in Calcutta (the Calcutta Municipal Corporation and the District Primary School Council) reveal that together they were running around 1,608 schools (1300 by DPSC and 308 by CMC) in 1999 (Interviews, DI, 2000).²³ These are independent primary schools that offer grades I to IV of primary education. Few primary schools have grade V which is attached to upper primary schools. The annual report of the education department gives the number of schools by the highest stage of education offered (see number of schools in 1999 in Table 3.2). There are no details of the number of upper primary, secondary and higher secondary schools that have primary sections. In this paper these schools are referred to as composite schools. NCERT (1997a) provides details of such composite schools from the AIES in 1993. As seen in Table 3.3, in 1993, there were 643 composite schools with primary sections, in addition to the 1,711 independent primary schools reported in the city. Thus the total number of primary schools/sections in the city was 2,354, suggesting that more than a quarter of primary school provision was in institutions that provide higher levels of school education.

The management of schools is of interest. Table 3.2 indicates that as many as 1,610 (94.1 per cent) of independent primary schools are managed by government and local bodies while only 5.9 per cent are privately managed. Privately managed schools include (a) privately managed aided schools (PA) that receive funds from the state government (there were 97 such schools at the primary stage); and (b) privately managed unaided schools (PUA) that do not receive any aid from the government. Only four such schools were listed in 1993. At the secondary/higher secondary level, schools are mainly privately managed. Hence it is likely that the majority of primary sections are in privately managed composite schools. There are two points of concern here. Firstly, private management at the primary level is much

²³ It is quite likely that the number of primary schools in Calcutta in 1999 was over 1,700. The AIES mentions that there were 1,711 primary schools in Calcutta in 1993 of which 101 were privately managed. If these privately managed schools are added to the DPSC and CMC managed schools reported in 1999, the total number of primary schools in the city that year works out to 1,709.

larger than what appears from official reports that give only the number of independent primary schools. Secondly, children who enter primary sections of composite schools (27.4 per cent of the total number of schools offering primary schooling in 1993), have access to grade V and higher levels of schooling within the same school. On the other hand, children who are enrolled in independent primary schools (72.6 per cent of all schools/sections in 1993), have access only to grades I–IV (see Table 3.3). For the former, the schools they enter provide for continuity in their education while for the latter this is not the case. Further, primary sections in secondary/higher secondary schools (particularly those that are privately managed), are likely to have relatively better facilities than that provided in independent primary schools.²⁴ Thus primary schooling is structurally differentiated in terms of access (even to grade V) as well as quality of facilities.

Table 3.2 School profile, Calcutta

Stage	Number of schools*			Management of schools 1993				Total enrolment \$	
	1999*	1993*	1993**	Govt	LB	PA	PUA	1999	1993
Primary	1435	1711	2354	2	1608	97	4	420924	361990
Upper Primary	112	100	645	3	12	84	1	216780	166346
Secondary	497	378	547	9	38	306	25	112820	86809
Higher Secondary	184	167	169	13	9	120	27	102118	34845

Source: GOWB (2000), *Annual Report 1999–2000*.

NCERT (1997), *Sixth All India Education Survey. State Level Reports–West Bengal*.

* According to the highest stage of education offered.

** Includes sections in schools that offer this stage of education.

\$ Includes enrolment in relevant sections in composite schools. Total enrolment at the primary stage is for grades I–V.

Govt. – government; LB – local body; PA – private aided; PUA – private unaided; NFE – Non formal education.

Recent research has pointed to a growing number of what are called “unrecognised” schools – privately managed schools that are not within the purview of government norms and regulations for school functioning.²⁵ There are no definite estimates of the number of private “unrecognised” schools in Calcutta. The REC recommended that the government ‘insist on compulsory registration of such schools . . . and to insist on the compliance of certain minimum rules and standards before such registrations are granted’ (1992: 277). This has not been done and officially there is a tendency to deny the existence of

²⁴ In 1993, 69.6 per cent of secondary schools in West Bengal had “*pucca*” buildings and 93.6 per cent had drinking water facilities as compared to only 37.2 per cent and 64.3 per cent of independent primary schools, that had these facilities respectively (NCERT 1998: 147, 161).

²⁵ The quality of education in such “unrecognised” schools is often suspect as many are in the nature of teaching shops. However as they have the label “private” and profess to teach in English, such schools often mushroom to meet the demand for quality education even among the poor.

such schools at the primary stage. Nevertheless, government officials privately acknowledge that “unrecognised” schools are mushrooming in the city and the extended metropolis particularly at the pre-primary level’ (Interviews, APD, 2001).

Table 3.3 Structure of primary schooling, Calcutta – 1993

Stage of schooling (grades)	Primary schools/sections	
	No.	Percentage
Primary only (I–IV)	1711	72.6 (1300 DPSC, 308 CMC in 1999)
Primary+upper primary (I–VIII)	100	4.3
Primary+upper primary+ secondary (I–X)	376	16.0
Primary, upper primary, secondary + higher secondary (I–XIII)	167	7.1
Total	2354	100.0

Source: NCERT (1997a) *Sixth All India Education Survey. State Level Reports – West Bengal.*

There are also alternative schools that have been set up under the SRG programme to provide education (equivalent to grades I to IV in government schools) to children who are not enrolled in regular primary schools. In October 2001 there were 226 such schools being run by the NGOs of Calcutta. The Calcutta Municipal Corporation has also set up Child Education Centres (SSK). The SRG survey mentions that there were around 347 non-formal education programme schools that were functioning in the city (Cyril 1999: 16).

Table 3.2 reveals the pyramid-like structure of schooling in the city. For around every four primary schools/sections there was only one upper primary school/section in 1993. Availability of secondary and higher secondary schooling is even poorer. In other words, for the majority of primary school children, upper primary and higher levels of schooling are just not available. However as mentioned, this is true for children in independent primary schools rather than those who are in primary sections of composite secondary and higher secondary schools.

3.4 Primary schooling for the poor

The main providers of primary schooling in Calcutta are local bodies: the CMC and the DPSC.²⁶ These are publicly funded schools that cater largely to the needs of the poor. While CMC schools charge no fee, DPSC schools are permitted to charge a nominal “development fee”. These schools offer incentives (such

²⁶ Schools managed by the DPSC and CMC are hereafter called DPSC and CMC schools. As mentioned earlier, DPSC schools were formerly privately managed schools. With the coming of the LFG these schools were brought under the District Primary School Council and given a 100 per cent grant for their functioning. A provision has been made for a school welfare committee to be formed in each school in order to monitor the functioning of the school. However these committees have not yet been constituted and ad-hoc arrangements continue (Interviews, DI, 2001).

as free textbooks) that subsidise primary education. In accordance with government policy, CMC and DPSC schools cannot deny admission to any child.

While schools, particularly at the primary level, may be available within the 141 wards of Calcutta, they are often not easily accessible to poor families either because they are inconveniently located or are over-crowded. The SRG survey for instance, could locate only 10,000 vacant seats/places in the existing primary schools (DPSC and CMC) in 1999 whereas the number of out-of-school 5–9 year olds was 44,646. Thus it is not surprising that when parents of these children were asked why they were not enrolled, a significant response was ‘schools are not there’ (a response that received the third highest ranking) (Cyril 1999: 13).

Table 3.4 Enrolment in DPSC and CMC schools in Calcutta – 1999

Grade	General			Scheduled caste			Muslim			Total*		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
I	19378	17382	36760	1624	1044	2068	3456	3665	7121	24,542	22,107	46,649
II	13180	12821	26001	1127	720	1847	2563	2448	5011	16,876	15,989	32,865
III	13016	13526	26542	948	662	1610	2537	2336	4873	16,503	16,524	33,027
IV	12636	12476	25112	718	475	1193	1175	2357	3532	14,530	15,309	29,839
V**	835	476	1311	42	36	78	151	121	272	1028	633	1661
Total	59,045	56,681	115,726	4459	2937	7396	9882	10927	20809	73,479	70,562	1,44,041
CMC	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	---	-	20324	23199	43523
Total	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	---	-	93803	93761	187564

Source: Office of the District Inspector of Schools, Calcutta; CMC, Calcutta.

* There were only 24 children from ST communities enrolled in DPSC schools. CMC schools had 30 children from ST and 1784 from SC communities.

** Only a few schools offer grade V.

In 1999, there were 1,87,564 children enrolled in DPSC and CMC schools. Of these, around 23 per cent were in CMC schools.²⁷ Grade wise enrolment for DPSC schools is given in Table 3.4. It also gives the social composition of school enrolment. As can be seen, Muslim children comprise around 14 per cent of children in these schools while only 6 per cent belong to Scheduled Castes. Overall gender differentials in enrolment are barely discernible and 49 per cent of children in DPSC schools and 53 per cent in CMC schools are girls. It is interesting that Muslim girls outnumber boys in DPSC schools. This was also mentioned (by a number of Head Teachers interviewed during the course of the study) as a feature among poor Muslim families living in the slums. In contrast, among Scheduled Caste families, boys outnumbered

²⁷ Enrolment of children in Calcutta in 1999 as given in GOWB (2000) is for grades I–V. Hence, the proportion of primary school children in Calcutta who were enrolled in DPSC and CMC schools (grades I to IV) in 1999 could not be estimated.

girls in schools. As seen in Table 3.4, gender differences are sharp among Scheduled Castes. Scheduled Tribes comprise a negligible number in both CMC and DPSC schools.²⁸

The relative decline in enrolment between grades is often used as an indicator of the extent of dropout and stagnation that occurs as children proceed through school.²⁹ Table 3.5 presents enrolment in each primary school grade as a percentage of enrolment in grade I for all schools in the city as well as those managed by the DPSC. Relevant details for 11 primary schools³⁰ surveyed for this study (henceforth referred to as School Survey 2000) have been given alongside.³¹

Table 3.5 Grade wise enrolment as a percentage of enrolment in Grade I, Calcutta – 1999*

Grade	Enrolment as a percentage of grade I		
	DPSC schools (1999)	Calcutta (1993)**	Surveyed schools (2000)#
I	100.0	100.0	100.0
II	70.5	76.3	59.7
III	70.8	72.8	59.6
IV	63.9	65.5	40.6

Source: NCERT (1997); School Survey (2000).

* Details are given for grades I–IV.

** As enrolment in each primary school grade in 1999 is not available, 1993 data is given.

Only two schools had grade V.

As can be seen in Table 3.5, there is a sharper fall in enrolment in grades I–IV in DPSC schools as compared to the city as a whole. In DPSC schools, fall in enrolment has been around 30 per cent between grades I and II as compared to 23.7 per cent where city level enrolment is concerned. In the surveyed schools – which cater mainly to the slum population – the fall is sharper and there are nearly 40 per cent fewer children in grade II than grade I (Table 3.5). Head Teachers of primary schools who were interviewed, explain the relatively large magnitude of fall in enrolment between grade I and grade II only

²⁸ Scheduled Tribes comprised 0.3 per cent of the population of Calcutta in 1998. As mentioned earlier, 12.7 per cent of the city population belonged to Scheduled Castes and 10.4 per cent were Muslims (IIPS 2001: 19).

²⁹ Specific cohort analysis could have provided a relatively reasonable estimate of the extent of dropout from school. In its absence cross sectional data on enrolment (despite its limitations) has been used to throw some light on the possible magnitude of discontinuation from schools.

³⁰ The schools surveyed catered to children from neighbouring slums. Of the 11 schools, three were managed by the CMC and DPSC managed eight. DPSC schools were set up at the initiative of private individuals for a number of reasons including: (a) there was no school in the area, (b) to address the extent of illiteracy among poor, and (c) the need for education as the area was notorious for drug peddling, and liquor selling. One of the schools which was located within a slum was started by a social worker as there was no Bengali medium school in the area. Organisations like the Ambedkar Seva Samiti, the Adi Dharm Samiti and the Harijan Kalyan Kendra were also responsible for establishing schools that catered to the slum population.

³¹ During the School Survey (2000), details of primary schools and facilities available were obtained. Teachers were asked about a number of aspects of school functioning. Their perceptions of children and their parents were also elicited. These details are referenced as School Survey, 2000. In addition, in-depth interviews were held with Head Teachers of three primary schools (two DPSC and one CMC) during the second round of fieldwork in 2001 to obtain insights on issues of concern for the education of the poor. These are referenced as Interviews, Head Teachers, 2001.

partly as a result of the actual dropout of children from school. According to them, this results mainly because primary schools do not offer pre-primary education despite the growing demand for it. In response to the demand from poor parents to send their young children to school at the earliest, schools tend to admit children below the prescribed age of 5/6 years in grade I. Grade I is hence, unofficially divided into two sections: IB for children who are called infants (i.e. those under the official age of school entry) and section IA for those ready for grade I. Head Teachers feel it is unfair to refuse admission to children whose parents cannot send them to private nurseries. In fact they say that schools are actually providing a facility that is essential to attune poor children to the regular school routine. As one Head Teacher remarked, 'our objective is to facilitate the teaching process' (Interviews, Head Teachers, 2001).³² Administrators also point to this practice to suggest that dropout between grades I and II may actually be relatively small as children do not leave school after grade I but are deliberately kept back till they are ready for grade II (Interviews, DI, 2001).

Very few primary schools have grade V which is located mainly in upper primary sections in secondary/higher secondary schools that are relatively small in number (see Tables 3.3 and 3.4). Inadequate access to upper primary schooling is said to result in considerable shifting of children between schools during their primary school years. According to teachers, children often leave before grade IV when they receive admission to primary schools that are located within a secondary/higher secondary school building. This is mainly because children from primary (DPSC) schools that are located within buildings that house secondary/higher secondary schools are usually given preference in admission to grade V in the upper primary sections in these schools. Such primary schools are hence in demand as they offer some possibility of children's physical continuity in schooling. They are also seen to provide better facilities for education than is generally the case. It is estimated that of the 1,300 DPSC schools only around 500 schools (i.e. 38.4 per cent) are located in a secondary/higher secondary school building (Interviews, APD, 2000; DI 2001).

Thus, what emerges from the discussion is that primary schooling is not available to a large section of children in Calcutta. Further, a majority of children of the poor who go to CMC and DPSC schools and who do manage to reach grade IV find that access to schooling for them physically stops there. As mentioned earlier, the fact that there are a large number of primary sections does suggest that this is not the case for a significant section of children who can afford education in largely privately managed, fee charging composite schools.

³² According to one of the school heads, teachers face considerable difficulty if children entering grade I have not been to pre-primary school. They say that though regular pre-primary sections have been recommended in primary schools, this is unlikely to be implemented as it will involve additional recruitment of teachers and thereby further financial burden which the government is unlikely to incur (Interviews, Head Teachers, 2001).

3.5 Quality of schooling³³

There is no consensus as to what is meant by quality of schooling and how it is to be measured or assessed. Broadly, if the concern is children's learning experience, it is likely to be influenced by the physical environment of the school, the nature and quality of classroom instruction and teacher-pupil interaction, peer relations and so on. These factors have an important bearing on how and what children learn in schools. The School Survey (2000) attempted to explore some aspects of the quality of the learning environment for poor children in primary schools.

3.5.1 Facilities for schooling

As already discussed, physical facilities for schooling and basic amenities are not available in a large proportion of primary schools in West Bengal. The situation in Calcutta, while significantly better than in schools in urban West Bengal is by no means satisfactory as seen in Table 3.6. The AIES in 1993 showed that 1,184 schools (69.2 per cent) lacked a concrete building and 27.3 per cent had two or fewer rooms for instructional purposes. In fact there were 102 schools that were recorded to have no classroom at all. There were also a significant number of schools (17.9 per cent) that did not have facilities for drinking water or toilets. When interviewed, the Deputy Education Officer (DEO) estimated that even in 2001, there were around 400 primary schools in the city with only one or two classrooms (Interviews, DEO, 2001)

Table 3.6 Facilities in primary schools* in Calcutta, urban West Bengal (1993) and surveyed schools (2000)

	Calcutta schools	%	Urban West Bengal schools	%	Surveyed schools
Pucca/concrete building	1,184	69.2	4,441	54.7	11
Two or fewer classrooms	467	27.3	3,434	42.3	3
Drinking water facility	1,405	82.1	5,299	65.2	2
Toilets (urinals)	1,425	83.3	4,595	56.6	9
Separate toilets for girls	481	28.1	1,404	17.3	4**
Total	1,711	-	8,122	-	11

Source: School Survey (2000); NCERT (1997; 1997a).

* Details are given for independent primary schools.

** In two schools these were for the staff.

Visits to the CMC and DPSC schools confirm the bleak environment within which poor children study. School buildings are poorly maintained and their surroundings are unclean. One of the major problems that schools in Calcutta face is that of inadequate space, both in terms of built-up area as well as open space. CMC schools usually have their own buildings and in many cases, grounds for children to play as

³³ This section draws from the School Survey (2000) and interviews with Head Teachers, school administrators and teacher association representatives, as well as NGOs. See Annex for details.

well. DPSC-managed schools are largely in rented buildings that offer very little space. No additional construction can be undertaken in such buildings. The number of effective classrooms varies from one room in two schools to as many as 12 classrooms (each primary school grade having two sections) in what is seen as the most well functioning school surveyed (See Table 3.7). Where there is only one room, children in different grades are grouped together in different parts of the room and taught amidst din and chaos. Only one of the schools reported a separate room for the office and a staff room for teachers.

Facilities within the classroom for children to sit, read and write in reasonable comfort are poor. Children mainly sit on benches. Some schools have higher benches for children to write on. Some CMC schools also provide desks. Children (usually grades I and II) are also made to sit on the floor when there are no benches or where there is overcrowding in the classroom. Mats are supposed to be provided for them to sit on. Children bring their own mats, jute bags or paper to sit on where mats are not provided, or are not in usable condition. When asked, a CMC official said that 'when children sit on the ground, teachers are able to move around and between them and thereby reach each child' (Interviews, DMC, 2000). However, children spoken with in one of the schools said 'sitting on the ground is very uncomfortable especially when we are asked to write. During the monsoon the floors get wet and we are unable to sit on the damp floor' (School Survey 2000).

All schools complained of crowded classrooms and inadequate furniture for children to do their lessons. Teachers in single room schools specifically reported that teaching was greatly hampered, as all students were crowded into one room. The absence of adequate ventilation and electricity were some of the critical problems listed by Head Teachers in schools. Lack of adequate furniture is likely to make efforts to bring an increasing number of children to school problematic. Some schools clearly said they try to restrict admissions because of lack of space and furniture.³⁴

One of the major problems that children face is the absence of safe drinking water within the premises of the school. Only two of the schools have tube wells but the water is reportedly unclean. While toilets were provided in most schools, a separate toilet for women was available only in four of the schools.³⁵ However it is significant that despite the relatively poor physical quality of schools, they appear to provide a far better environment for the children than the slums they live in. Teachers said that 'coming to school during the monsoon is difficult for children because of heavy showers and flooded roads, but staying home is usually worse as it is cramped and damp and children cannot play outside. So they prefer to attend school during monsoons as well' (School Survey 2000).

³⁴ The NGO, CINI Asha also reported that the Head Teacher of a local school refused to admit children from the neighbouring slum in her school on the plea that the school had neither the space nor the furniture to accommodate more children. However she agreed to admit them on a request by the DPSC School Administrator, but only if CINI arranged to provide a few tables and chairs for the school (Interview, CINI, 2001).

³⁵ There have been some efforts by individual Head Teachers to seek assistance from other organisations for improving facilities within their school. One of the schools for instance, has been able to get the Calcutta Rotary Club to install fans in the classrooms. The Rotary Club had agreed to pay the school's electricity charges as well.

Interviews with school administrators indicated that the quality of infrastructure in schools varied with the management of the school and its location. For instance, CMC schools have their own buildings, grounds and better infrastructure than DPSC schools. DPSC schools are mainly housed in rented buildings that are in urgent need of their own accommodation.³⁶ Though the DPSC (and CMC) schools are generally seen to cater to the poorer sections of urban Calcutta, it appears that those that are located in secondary and higher secondary school buildings offer distinctly better facilities than do primary schools with their own premises. These schools are hence in demand by lower middle class families as well (Interviews, DI, 2001). Only one of the 11 primary schools surveyed was located in a secondary school building.

3.5.2 Resources

Budgetary allocations to primary education are by all accounts less than adequate. As mentioned earlier, the major proportion of these resources is used to meet payment of teachers' salaries leaving aside barely anything for improvement in school infrastructure or teaching-learning processes. This is reflected in the poor quality of facilities and lack of teaching aids in schools.

All school heads spoken with reported that the financial condition of their schools was dismal. Though local body managed primary schools are publicly funded schools, the resources they receive are extremely inadequate and schools have to either make do with what they receive from the state government/CMC or raise their own funds. Schools under the DPSC are given Rs. 50 per month for contingent expenditures. This does not meet even the day-to-day expenditure that schools incur. Teachers also contribute to routine school expenses such as the purchase of instructional aids, chalk, cleaning of the school and so on. For the cleaning of the school premises, sweepers have to be paid separately and this approximately works out to Rs. 70 in a primary school with two rooms to around Rs. 250 per month in larger buildings. DPSC teachers claim that their routine school expenses work out to around Rs. 1200 to Rs. 2000 per month, which is met by contributions from teachers, ancillary fees and collections from students (School Survey 2000). At times funds are made available by the DPSC to individual schools for construction and repair. However, only schools that have their own buildings are eligible for such funds³⁷ (Interviews, DI, 2001).

³⁶ According to the DI, 90 per cent of DPSC schools are in rented buildings. As rents have officially been fixed at around Rs. 400 per year (which is far below prevailing commercial rents), owners refuse to make improvements in the buildings, which are in a dilapidated state. On the other hand, owners who are anxious to recover their properties have drawn the DPSC into litigation (Interviews, DI, 2001).

³⁷ Around Rs. 75,000 to Rs. 1 lakh is given for the construction of a new classroom but that is also insufficient. Some schools augment their funds through donations from the community and this is officially encouraged (Interviews, DI, 2001). As mentioned earlier, the majority of DPSC schools are in rented buildings and hence no construction or repair is carried out in such cases.

3.5.3 Content and medium of education

Subjects taught in primary school are Language, Maths, Science and English as second language. Teachers report Maths as a subject that children are particularly weak in. According to them, Maths requires a lot of practice which slum children are not able to ensure (School Survey 2000). However it is interesting that children, when spoken with, uniformly said that they enjoyed Maths. An NGO teacher explained why this may be so:

Children from the slums learn to count money quite early on. Even small children, if they get something that can be sold, they tend to sell it. If they have broken plastic things at home they save it and weigh it in order to exchange it for sweet biscuits.

(Interviews, Howrah teachers, 2001)

All schools were teaching English from grade III, and some had begun to do so from grade II itself. Except in a couple of schools, teachers spoken with emphasised that there is demand for the teaching of English from the general parent as well as those of slum children. Teachers were in favour of responding to this demand as English ‘will enhance the communication skills of the students. Otherwise these children will lag behind’ (School Survey 2001). As mentioned earlier, English as a language of study was initially removed from the primary school curriculum by the LFG in 1984–5. This was seen as ‘one of the significant decisions of the post 1977 period’ (REC 1992: 9). CMC schools strictly adhered to this policy decision of the government, while DPSC schools continued to teach the language, because of the social demand for it. In fact the DEO attributes the decline in enrolment in CMC schools in the 1980s partly to the fact that ‘the teaching of English had been abolished in these schools during this period. Following from this, lower middle class Bengali families (both DPSC and CMC are mainly Bengali medium schools) tended to shift their children to DPSC schools as they continued to teach English as the second language’ (Interviews, 2000). Subsequently as mentioned, the government was forced to reintroduce English in primary school. English was taught from grade V in 1994–5 and from grade III in 1999–2000 (GOWB 2000: 57). The DEO claimed that ‘the resumption of the teaching of English in CMC schools is one of the reasons why enrolment in these schools has increased in recent years’ (Interviews, DEO, 2000).³⁸

An issue that has received inadequate attention is the medium of instruction in schools, particularly those that cater to the poor. One of the objectives of the LFG when it came to power was to provide education in the mother tongue to children not only at the primary level but throughout their education (REC 1992: 5). Calcutta is a cosmopolitan city and there are a variety of language speakers especially among the poor, a large section of whom are migrants from other states of India as well as neighbouring Bangladesh. However, primary schools in Calcutta are largely Bengali medium schools. For instance, of

³⁸ The reasons for decline in enrolment in CMC schools from 45,000 in 1977–8 to around 35,000 in 1988–9 (according to REC 1992: 45) and subsequent increase in the 1990s are obviously related to the overall context of school quality and the demand for education rather than merely whether English was taught in these schools or not. In fact, it must also be mentioned that DPSC schools became more affordable after 1977 when the LFG abolished the charging of tuition fees in these formerly privately managed schools. However it is also true that the teaching of English is factored into popular perceptions of quality of education on offer in schools.

the 1,300 DPSC schools, 940 (around 72 per cent) are Bengali medium. The number of Hindi (260) and Urdu medium schools (100) is proportionately much smaller (Interviews, DI: 2001).

Is the medium of instruction a constraint where the education of the poor is concerned? What emerges from interviews with school administrators is that there is a growing demand for Urdu and Hindi medium schooling from the migrant population residing in the slums and who are now seeking an education for their children.³⁹ However, while there are a large number of Bengali teachers, Hindi and Urdu teachers are relatively few in number. Over the years, Bengali speaking children have moved out of CMC schools and into DPSC schools some of which, as mentioned earlier, are seen to be of better quality and provide for continuity. Thus a situation has arisen where on the one hand, there are schools with a large number of students but without enough teachers to teach in the desired medium (Hindi and Urdu). The teacher-pupil ratio (TPR) in these schools is often 1:50 and more, though skewed TPRs are not visible in overall state averages (Interviews, DEO, 2000). On the other hand, there are many Bengali medium schools (especially managed by CMC), with a large number of teachers but relatively few students. Some Bengali medium schools are said to have begun introducing Hindi sections in primary school grades.⁴⁰

Teachers in the surveyed schools with Bengali as medium did not agree that the language of instruction posed a major constraint in the education of children from the slums. A few said that children do experience some problems in picking up intricacies of language and pronunciation, and at times ‘mix up the languages’ but tend to feel that they are able to cope with Bengali as a medium of instruction.⁴¹ However, most teachers in Hindi medium schools did say that there was demand from parents in the slums for Hindi as the medium of instruction in school (School Survey 2000).

3.5.4 Are children learning?

There is a stated policy of non-detention in primary school in West Bengal as in many other states in the country. As stated by the REC ‘The principle of no detention up to class V was adopted in the belief that this would discourage dropouts’. However, the REC goes on to echo the general perception that ‘the practice of “no detention” has encouraged greater slipshodness in teaching and learning’ (1992: 40). In response to public criticism and concern about whether children were learning in schools, the WBBPE has been holding an external evaluation at the end of grade II since 1999. A strategy adopted is to publish the results of the evaluation school wise so that schools are concerned that children learn and perform well. Further, schools are required to show parents/guardians the answer scripts of their wards. According

³⁹ The Dharapara slum has a relatively large Hindi speaking population. A private school that borders the slum was set up specifically to cater to the demand from the community for schooling in Hindi medium (Interviews, Head Teachers, 2000).

⁴⁰ The issue is not merely one of responding to the demand for education in Urdu or Hindi but also of the quality of facilities that are provided for children to learn in the medium (good textbooks, competent teachers and so on). In the absence of this, children taught through the medium of Urdu and Hindi are likely to be at a disadvantage in primary school and beyond it.

⁴¹ Of pertinence is Acharya’s contention that the ‘modern Bengali language’ in which prescribed primers and readers are written poses ‘great hurdles for promoting mass education. The language in which these books are written, though called Bengali, is not at all familiar to the mass of people’ (Acharya 1982: 127)

to the DI, this has had a positive impact on both the schools and the parents. Using the results of the evaluation, the DPSC has also identified “weak” and “strong” clusters of schools according to children’s performance. Subsequently, weak schools are provided a workbook called *‘kajerpata’* to prepare students to perform well in the external evaluation (Interviews, DI, 2001).

The subjection of children to a public examination barely within two years of school entry militates against basic pedagogic principles of how children learn and the role of assessment in this process. It is also likely to influence what they learn, as schools compete to perform well in the evaluation as the results are publicly announced. The magnitude of detention in schools may also be affected. For instance, schools are likely to reduce the number of children who are permitted to enter grade II in order to better their performance. In one of the schools, the Head Teacher informally admitted that many children are detained in grade I as grade II children have to appear for the external evaluation. Children who fail are shown as dropouts as schools officially follow a non-detention policy (Interviews, Head Teachers, 2001; School Survey 2000).

One of the major inputs into children’s learning is “coaching” or private tutoring (tuitions). NGOs linked this to the fact that there is little teaching that goes on in primary schools. As one of the teachers in an NGO coaching centre observed, ‘In primary grades, teachers do not pay adequate attention to children. The whole of school teaching is also “homework oriented” and children, especially first generation learners, are entirely dependant on private tuitions for their education’ (Interviews, CINI teachers, 2001). Another NGO teacher remarked that ‘only those students who are attentive during private tuitions are doing well in primary school. The others are simply promoted to the next grade’ (Interviews, Howrah teachers, 2001). Primary school children almost without exception attend such sessions after school. They are tutored individually or in groups. Tutoring is either private (by individual teachers, unemployed youth), through NGOs who have set up “coaching classes” or by privately managed missionary schools.

Parents of poor children pay anywhere between a monthly Rs. 20 to Rs. 30 per child when children are tutored in groups (depending on how large these groups are), to as much as Rs. 75 to Rs. 100 per child where individual attention is received. At the upper primary stage, individual private tuitions cost anywhere upwards from Rs. 200 a month (Interviews, Head Teachers, 2001). According to the NCAER/HDI survey, the average annual household expenditure on education (in government schools) of children aged 6–14 years in rural India in 1994 was Rs. 539 while in West Bengal (rural) it was Rs. 516. However, the average cost of coaching (or private tutoring) accounted for as much as 41 per cent of annual household expenditure on education in West Bengal as compared to the corresponding all India average of around 8 per cent (Shariff 1999: 286). Private tuitions are reported to influence continuity in primary schooling. Teachers of secondary schools are said to give preference in admission to grade V to primary school students whom they privately tutor. A Head Teacher alleged that ‘One way by which parents ensure admission to grade V is to enroll their children in the coaching classes of secondary school teachers. Such children are easily admitted to grade V in schools where these teachers teach. As a result many good students of our school are denied admission while the poor performers manage to enter grade V’ (Interviews, Head Teachers, 2001).

The NGO, CINI Asha initially set up its free coaching centres to reinforce classroom instruction and provide additional inputs that were not available to poor children within their homes. However, one of the teachers in the organisation's coaching center observed that 'the poor quality of classroom instruction forces us to engage in basic teaching rather than merely reinforce what has been taught in schools' (Interviews, CINI teachers, 2001). The coordinator of CINI's educational programme said:

Our own experience is that there is a growing demand for coaching from poor parents for their children. Though we do not wish to encourage the practice of private tutoring, we are forced to address educational needs of children that are not being met by the schools. Such academic support is critical if children are to be retained even in primary school grades. As children progress through schools, they need increasingly specialised academic support for subjects such as Maths, Science, Humanities and so on'.

(Interviews, CINI, 2001)

Officially the wide prevalence of private coaching is located in the larger context of 'free market ideology in education' and is seen as a reflection of the 'commercialization of education' (Basu *et al.* 1997: 130). However it is maintained that this 'cannot be counteracted through state measures alone, but requires promoting an educational culture as a movement – left teachers and students organizations need to take a much stronger and effective role in combating these tendencies' (Ibid). However at a more basic level the magnitude of private tutoring is also a reflection of the poor functioning of schools and particularly the role of teachers, issues that have yet to be squarely addressed by "left teachers" and their organisations.

3.5.5 Teachers in schools

According to NCERT (1997a), there were 8,086 primary school teachers in Calcutta in 1993. In the same year, over 1,000 sanctioned posts of primary teachers remained vacant. This was largely because there had been no regular recruitment of teachers since the late 1980s as teacher recruitment in the state was enmeshed in litigation (the absolute decline in the number of teachers in West Bengal in the 1990s has already been mentioned). It was only in the year 2000 that fresh recruitments were made in schools. In 1993, the average teacher-pupil ratio (TPR) in primary schools in Calcutta (33.4) was lower than that for the state (43.4) in general as well as in schools in urban West Bengal (37.4). However, as many as 32.5 per cent of primary schools in the city had three or fewer teachers in position (NCERT 1997a). The surveyed schools reported shortage of teachers especially in the years prior to 2000 when recruitment was made in schools after long gap. Thus a number of schools had a sanctioned strength of only two teachers for four grades until 2000. The number of teachers is still reported to be inadequate (School Survey 2000; see Table 3.7).

The officially prescribed TPR is 1:40. However TPR in individual schools ranged from 1:21 to 1:100 (see Table 3.7). Though almost all schools had requested the concerned authorities for additional teachers,

they say that the actual process of teacher recruitment is a long and cumbersome one. Teachers felt that the delay in recruitment had affected the quality of classroom instruction (School Survey 2000).

What emerged quite clearly in discussions with teachers in the schools was their unhappiness with the conditions under which they worked, particularly crowded classrooms and high teacher-pupil ratios. Teachers felt that it was unfair to force them to teach in crowded classrooms and then insist that they create a joyful environment for children to learn in:⁴²

For the teacher to be joyful is the most important thing . . . but the problem is that there are too many children in one class. We find that one child has learnt something, another has not, some are absent . . . giving attention to each child is a problem . . . To bring out the capabilities of each child in different ways is a difficult task . . . Many lag behind. Is it because of our negligence? We are expected to teach more than 60 to 80 children who often have no books or slates. Many live on the streets and work as well. We are teachers not machines or computers . . . ?

(School Survey 2000)

The citywide effort underway to bring all non-enrolled children to school has meant that, there is pressure to take even older children in early primary school classes. Teachers resent this. In the earlier mentioned instance, though a Head Teacher had been persuaded to admit children from a neighbouring slum to her school, she subsequently blamed the school administrator for forcing her to admit children of 10 years into grade I making the grade difficult to teach or manage (Interviews, DI, 2000).

Table 3.7 Surveyed schools, a profile – 2000

School *	Manag ement	Year of establi shment	Teachers on roll	Qualifications of teachers		Class- room	Total enrol ment	TPR	Safe water	Toilet		Play gro- und
				Graduate and above	Train- ed					General	Girls	
BGK	CMC	1969	4	3	4	8	215	54	X	√	X	√
CMP	CMC	1968	5	2	5	6	185	37	X	√	X	X
CMG	CMC	1962	4	3	3	5	348	87	X	√	√	√
TAR	DPSC	1969	3	1	1	3	197	66	X	√	X	X
ADI	DPSC	1953	4	2	2	9	188	47	X	√	√	√
AMB	DPSC	1972	3	2	1	6	300	100	X	√	√	√
MAH	DPSC	1976	4	1	1	1	136	34	X	X	X	X
ALL	DPSC	1971	4	2	1	3	85	21	X	X	X	X
RAV	DPSC	1967	6	N.A.	N.A.	1(6)#	341	57	√	√	√	X
RAJ	DPSC	1981	3	2	2	1	131	45	X	√	X	X
POV	DPSC	1968	11	3	4	12	489	45	√	√	X	√

Source: School Survey (2000).

* Short forms for schools have been used.

Partitioned into six cubicles.

N.A. – Information not available. √ – with facility; X – without facility.

⁴² The reference is to the programme of “Joyful Learning” or Anandapath (AP) introduced by GOWB in primary schools in 1996 as part of a strategy to improve the quality of primary education. The AP is discussed in a later section.

Professional development of school teachers is a neglected sphere of improvement of school quality in India. In fact it is only around the 1990s that serious attention was directed to teacher training. Schools in Calcutta also have a large section of teachers who have no pre-service training. NCERT (1997a) reveals that only around 50 per cent of primary school teachers had pre-service training in 1993. As seen in Table 3.7, of the 51 teachers in the surveyed primary schools, only around half had some training, i.e. the year-long Junior Basic Training conducted by the Directorate of Education.⁴³ The CMC is said to recruit only trained teachers in its schools. This is not the case in DPSC schools; though trained candidates have an edge over the untrained candidates at the time of recruitment to schools (they score 20 additional points for pre-service training qualifications).

The quality and relevance of the basic teacher-training programme in West Bengal (the earlier Junior Basic Training (JBT)) are seen as problematic. According to an administrator, the curriculum of the PTT is outdated. While there is need for a review of the PTT, this is considered a sensitive issue. In West Bengal, curriculum development is under the purview of the WBBPE, an autonomous body. Efforts to review the PTT curriculum are likely to face resistance as WBBPE is reportedly a 'highly bureaucratised institution and has hitherto not been accountable to anyone' (Interviews, 2000: 2).

The DPEP in West Bengal is creating resource centres where teachers can receive necessary inputs for their work. As in other states where the programme is being implemented, Circle Level Resource Centres with resource teachers are being set up in rural areas where the programme is underway. In Calcutta, DPEP is involved with "urban deprived children" and training programmes are to be held for teachers of DPSC and CMC schools. However it appears that for the majority of primary school teachers, professional development is likely to be reduced to short orientations of a few days duration.⁴⁴

3.5.6 School functioning and quality of classroom instruction

The nature of school functioning and particularly the manner in which teachers discharge their responsibilities has come in for adverse comment. The School Survey suggests there is a certain ad-hocism in school functioning, as the number of days that a school functions for in a year and the hours during which children are in school, varied across schools. For instance, schools reported to have functioned for a minimum of 230 to a maximum of around 290 days the previous year (1999–2000). Schools also differed in the number of hours of each school day, which varied between four and five hours in different schools (School Survey 2000).

The REC made a specific reference to the functioning of schools and the quality of instruction in primary schools managed by urban local bodies (municipalities) in general and the Calcutta Municipal

⁴³ This is now called Primary Teacher's Training (PTT). There are 60 recognised teacher-training institutes in West Bengal and six in Calcutta. (Interviews, APD, 2001).

⁴⁴ At the time of the School Survey, a two-day orientation was being organised for newly recruited teachers. In barely two days, teachers were to receive an exposure to the curriculum, and what Anandapath (joyful learning) and universalisation of education mean. They were also given an idea of "Minimum Levels of Learning" that children are expected to achieve in each grade, the concept of evaluation, the use of teaching material in the classroom, involving the community in the school and so on. Subject based training was to be organised subsequently (Interviews, DI, 2001).

Corporation in particular. Pointing to CMC schools as in 'extremely bad shape' it refers to reports that, though there are formally qualified teachers in these schools and often more than the number required, 'attendance of teachers is irregular and even when classes are held, the quality of instruction imparted is altogether indifferent . . . A large section of teachers do not hesitate to play truant . . .' (1992: 45). Administrators and Head Teachers interviewed also acknowledged that the general perception was that teachers fail to adequately discharge their responsibilities. However Head Teachers said that this happened only in some cases and could not be generalised for all teachers. The factor they cited as most responsible for making even motivated teachers apathetic were the poor working conditions in schools: absence of infrastructure, teaching aids, electricity and so on (Interviews, 2001). School administrators (DI and DEO) were of the view that the poor competence of teachers was a major obstacle in classroom instruction. According to them, a large section of teachers lacked adequate teaching skills. While this was partly because of lack of training it was also seen to result from 'the failure to adequately equip teachers to cope with the needs of hitherto educationally deprived sections whose children are coming to primary schools as first generation learners' (Interviews, 2001).

There was also some reference to negative attitudes of teachers where the education of children from slums and pavements was concerned. Head teachers attributed this to lack of sensitivity in some teachers but emphasised that this was not the case where the average teacher was concerned. However they admitted that there was a need to orient teachers to the constraints that poor children face:

I have heard about teachers insulting children and their families who are first generation learners. Sometimes parents come and shout in protest. Such teachers' mind-set needs to be changed . . . But this is so only in some cases . . . All teachers are not the same . . . The teachers need to be sensitised about the mentality, emotional problems and opinions of these children. There are no such orientations for teachers at present.

(Interviews, Head Teachers, 2001)

According to the DI, there have been orientation programmes to sensitise teachers but these have not made a difference to the "school atmosphere". As he says, 'official interventions can only be in the form of orientation and supervision but motivation has to come from within. We must make an infinite appeal to teachers to motivate themselves. As you know there is no injection to improve motivation' (Interviews, 2001).

Interviews with a few children and teacher volunteers in the CINI coaching centre revealed that school teachers generally show little interest in creating an effective learning environment in the classroom. The pedagogy adopted in school is mainly one of reading from the textbook and using the blackboard. Children are required to learn by rote and to write answers to questions by copying, either from the blackboard, or portions that are marked out from the lesson in the textbook. A Maths class similarly is one where the teacher solves a problem on the blackboard and children copy the same in their answer books. Cyril, Principal of a privately managed school with a good reputation, observed that 'With

majority of teachers in government schools there is no planning of lessons and no reflection . . . It is only when teachers reach school that they think about what they might teach. There is no accountability' (Interviews, 2001). The REC also raises larger issues of accountability. Referring to CMC schools it forthrightly states that, 'schools remain neglected because the boys and girls who come to them consist almost entirely of children of slum dwellers'. Further it observes that 'monitoring and inspection are as good as non existent' (1992: 45). Rather than "sensitisation and reorientation" suggested by school administrators, the committee strongly advocates that the 'system of school inspection has to be revived and restructured' and representative committees be set up to 'monitor and supervise the content and quality of teaching in school' and ensure 'social accountability' (1992: 43).⁴⁵

It may be recalled that the LFG had specifically created structures for the effective governance of primary education in West Bengal, the WBBPE, DPSC as well as School Welfare Committees (SWC). These were envisioned as representative bodies that would play a crucial role in extending democratic rights to education and facilitating the smooth functioning of schools. However while SWC are yet to be put in place, elections to the DPSC were only held in 2000. As autonomous, nominated bodies, the DPSC and the WBBPE are seen to have become politicised and difficult to control. As an academic observed 'The DPSC is totally controlled by political parties . . . positive aspects that should have emerged from a participative body have failed to do so' (Interviews, 2001).

Teacher associations were in a position to play a vital role in addressing concerns of quality in education, largely because of the influence they wield over their teacher members. Further, there are teacher representatives on important bodies such as WBBPE and DPSC. However a former teacher activist observes that 'teachers have been used by parties in the state as political cadre and teacher associations have been guided by narrow partisan interests rather than a concern with children's development' (Interviews, 2000). According to an administrator who did not wish to be named, teachers' associations have largely been concerned with administrative and service related issues such as salary structure, pensions and other benefits. Among the academic issues taken up by the associations have been the teaching of English and the nature of evaluation. Teacher quality and performance have rarely been of concern:

Teacher associations could have influenced teacher functioning (insisted on punctuality and regular attendance in schools, that teachers should teach, etc.), but they have not done so. In fact, those in the leadership of the association are hardly teaching and are in full-time politics. Teachers who are

⁴⁵ Poor parents are keenly aware of the teacher's role in influencing school quality. In fact when a group of parents in one of the surveyed settlements was asked about the quality of different schools, they clearly pointed to teacher functioning as critical factor in distinguishing between "corporation" (CMC) schools, "sarkari" (DPSC) schools and "private" schools. Corporation schools were seen to have low standards as teachers did not teach and they lacked discipline, while "sarkari" schools had some 'good schools with good teachers' and were more disciplined than "corporation" schools. However "private" schools were in a better condition than the CMC or DPSC schools. They were "well funded" and teachers 'take good care of students' (Interviews, parents, 2001).

members of major teacher associations are usually immune from any penal action. If a school inspector tries to take action against a teacher the association “gets after him”.

(Interviews, 2001)

3.6 Poverty, child labour and educational deprivation: perceptions of providers

How do school providers perceive educational deprivation, usually seen in terms of non- enrolment, discontinuation from school and poor performance? How does this influence their perception of the educational needs of children and the nature of the institutional response that is necessary in this context? Primary teachers in the surveyed schools, as well as Head Teachers who were interviewed were asked to specifically comment on their experience with the education of children from the neighbouring slums. School administrators, the Minister for School Education, as well as NGOs also provide some insights on these issues.

3.6.1 Teachers' perceptions

For teachers, poverty as reflected in the family's need for the labour of their children, is one of the most critical factors responsible for non-enrolment of children in schools. In addition, the larger context of illiteracy and lack of education among the poor is seen to create home environments that are not conducive to children's learning. Children are seen to begin working by the ages of eight and nine years when they are sent to work in tea stalls, hotels, shops, and leather factories, as domestic help, rag pickers and so on. Such families are not merely poor, but parents are also seen to be largely ignorant of the importance of education:

They (parents) want their children to work . . . Because of poverty, some children are bonded, girls wash dishes in houses, some boys are sent to work in factories. Such parents do not know the value of education. Literate parents have more “attraction” to education. They make children understand . . . they are poor, there is something lacking in them. They must become something when they grow up. For this education is important’.

(School Survey 2000)

Why do children, whose parents enrol them in schools, leave their studies well before they complete primary education? As mentioned earlier, teachers and school administrators insist that the magnitude of dropout after grade I is far smaller than that projected by official figures because pre-school children enrolled in grade I are retained till they are ready for the second grade. The enrolling of under-age children is in fact seen as one way by which the school responds to poor parents' demand for pre-schooling which they would otherwise be unable to afford. Further, these children also receive mid-day meals/dry rations distributed in schools, which as pre-school children they would otherwise not be entitled to. On the other hand, enrolling children below the age of official school entry is also seen to help prepare children for regular grade I to which they are promoted in due course. Low transition rates to other grades are also explained by some teachers as resulting from the shifting of children between schools by parents in the

latter's quest for continuity in schooling for their children. In such cases children continue to remain within the school system.

Though failure is acknowledged as one of the reasons for dropout from school, children are seen to discontinue their education largely to begin work, especially in leather factories in the neighbourhood. Migration is also seen to pull children out-of-school. Families often migrate in search of employment and also tend to return periodically to their villages. Children usually accompany their parents. According to CINI, 'when children of migrants return after a gap to school there is reluctance to readmit them on the plea that they will be unable to cope with their work'⁴⁶ (Interviews, CINI Asha, 2001). Poor families are also forced to move residence within the city when their settlements are razed resulting in the dropout of children from the specific school concerned. A Head Teacher noted:

Child labour is an important reason for children leaving school. There is also the problem of the labour class families from Bihar who do not consider regular attendance as very important and tend to send their children off to the village on even flimsy occasions. They become irregular and dropout. Migration, due to many factors including forced demolition of slums, is an important reason for discontinuation from school'.

(Interviews, Head Teachers, 2001)

Teachers offered some explanation for the relatively high magnitude of discontinuation from school among Scheduled Caste girls as compared to boys and the reverse among Muslim children referred to earlier.⁴⁷ According to them, Scheduled Caste girls are withdrawn from work to look after their siblings while their parents go to work. Among Muslims, boys are sent out to work at an early age. However it is not seen as socially desirable for women to work outside the home and girls are allowed to carry on in school for a greater length of time. Marriage prospects are seen to encourage the education of girls. A teacher observed that 'Muslim parents feel that girls should be educated as this is now an important consideration while arranging their marriages. They are not very concerned about marriages of their sons. If a boy does not seem to be very keen on studying, by the age of 10 years he is pulled out-of-school and made to work'. Peer pressure is seen as important in pushing Muslim boys out-of-school whereas for girls, the reverse is seen as true (Interviews, Head Teachers, 2001; School Survey 2000).

Teachers place considerable onus for dropout from school and poor performance of children on the nature of home environments that children come from as well as on their own individual characteristics. Here, comparisons are often made of children from the slums with the average "non-slum child". While teachers expect regular attendance and concern about studies from the average non-slum child in school, they do not hold the same expectations of children coming from the slums. It was noted for instance that

⁴⁶ A study by CINI Asha of children they had mainstreamed into formal schools between 1994 and 2000 also revealed that involvement in work and migration were the two important reasons for dropout of children from schools (n.d.).

⁴⁷ In general, attendance rates are seen also to be higher among girls who are also found to be more concerned about completing their homework (Interviews, Head Teachers, 2001).

'children coming from non-slum backgrounds are likely to at least be prepared at home. This is not the case with slum children whose home environments need to be "developed" '.

The importance of literate and educated parents in creating an environment conducive for learning within the home was highlighted. According to Head Teachers, as they cater to the nearby slums, there are a large number of first generation learners in all the schools, in some cases more than 60 per cent, in other cases 20 to 40 per cent. Teachers felt that 'educated parents know the value of learning and want their children to do better than them. They are able to keep an eye on their children's education, help them with their homework or at least see that it is done and also cooperate with the teachers'. In other words, the feeling was that educated parents could build a culture of learning, inculcate necessary skills in children and help them with their studies at home. On the other hand, first generation learners were seen to lack the language and social skills that were necessary for learning. While non-literate parents may be interested in their children's schooling, it was felt that 'the family atmosphere in such homes is not always conducive for studies as parents lack education'.

Teachers were asked specifically about children from the slums who perform well in school and those who do badly or fail. Children who do well at school are seen to come from families that are poor but where parents have some education. Mothers are found to take a deep interest in their children's studies, and are "attentive" to their educational needs. The individual characteristics of the children are that they are obedient, intelligent, and serious about their studies and are "well behaved".

Those who perform poorly are seen to come from families where parents are not literate and in many instances the father tends to be an alcoholic. It was also mentioned that it was in these families that children are made to work, often in "hazardous" jobs. Some teachers made a specific mention of Muslims as 'a community that make children work at home', and among whom 'there is no interest in education'. Children who fail are seen to lack seriousness in their studies and appear disinterested in the activities of the school. Some teachers said that they find these children naughty and badly behaved. Others said they are playful and inattentive in class. Individual ability in itself is not seen as a major constraint in the education of children. Teachers felt that if the family environments are supportive, all children will be able to do reasonably well in their studies:

Children do have it in them to do well. One of the major problems is poverty. However if you give them a "proper atmosphere" at home they will study . . . Some parents are not really interested in how their children are doing. When such parents are called to school, they say, "What can we do?" At the most they give the child a beating. Where parents, particularly the mother, is somewhat educated, you find greater interest in the child's education. They come to the school to check how their children are doing'.

(School Survey 2000)

Schools presently offer no additional academic support to first generation learners. Some teachers said they did not have the space or time to do so. Others felt that by enrolling under-age children in schools as

they did at present, thereby facilitating entry and performance in grade I, schools were doing what was possible within the constraints of space, teacher shortage and lack of facilities. Teachers appeared more concerned about instilling social and moral qualities in children as well as the value of cleanliness and personal hygiene, rather than providing extra academic inputs. One Head Teacher did speak of the role that schools should play in encouraging poor children to come to school:

We cannot hold child labour responsible for non-enrolment and irregularity. In this particular slum my school does take initiative in going out and meeting the parents. A good motivation campaign by the school is a must if we want all children to attend school. The other related factor is how good the school is. And these two factors are actually two sides of the same coin.⁴⁸

(Interviews, Head Teacher, 2001)

The gains from education are seen to be of concern to poor parents. As one teacher remarked, 'Parents wonder what their children will do after class V. Ultimately they will be back to cutting *chappals* (slippers)'. According to one of the teacher association representatives, parents who withdraw their children from school find that 'there are no gains as such from education whereas children can quite easily get Rs. 30 to Rs. 40 per day from labour' (Interviews, 2001, TAR). While Head Teachers do say that all children must be brought to school, they emphasise that there is a need to 'link education to vocational skills for poor children by the time they are around 14 years of age' (Interviews, 2001).

Teachers estimated that on an average, parents of primary school-going children are likely to incur around Rs. 100 to Rs. 200 per annum on expenses such as stationery, notebooks and so on. However these estimates do not include costs such as that incurred on uniforms as well as private tuitions, both of which comprise a significant proportion of household expenditure on schooling at the primary stage. Though schooling is seen to impose some financial burden on poor families, none of the teachers interviewed felt that school expenses per se are primarily responsible for children's dropout from school. However in the SRG survey, parents of out-of-school children gave the highest rating to costs of education as the main reason why children discontinued school (SRG 1999).

As mentioned earlier, among the important policy measures to subsidise the costs of schooling and encourage children to come to school has been the provision of incentives. All children benefit from free tuition, though DPSC schools charge an annual development fee. Officially all children are supposed to be supplied textbooks free of cost⁴⁹ and girl students of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities should receive free uniforms. Information on the number of children who are covered by incentives in the schools of Calcutta is not available. However, the relatively narrow coverage of incentives such as free uniforms and mid-day meals in West Bengal has already been referred to. At the time of the School

⁴⁸ This Head Teacher also suggested that schools could arrange to literally make space for the working child. In his school children selling soft drinks and fruits are encouraged to attend classes with their packs and during the recess/lunchbreak they sell fruits and drinks to other children! (Interviews, Head Teachers, 2001). This was the only instance of the kind that was cited.

⁴⁹ A common complaint of teachers is that supply of textbooks is irregular and they are often received well after the academic session is underway.

Survey, children were being given dry rations at infrequent intervals.⁵⁰ Giving of dry rations at intervals obviously does not meet the original objective of the mid-day meal programme which is to increase children's participation/regular attendance in school on a daily basis. However this did not appear to be a major concern of Head Teachers and administrators for whom the distribution of dry rations was a cumbersome process and appeared to increase children's attendance at the distribution centres rather than in schools.⁵¹ NGOs such as CINI are against the practice of giving mid-day meals in school as they say that children will, as a consequence, not be fed adequately at home. Other NGOs interviewed were not in agreement and felt that hungry children are unlikely to be able to study (Interviews, CINI; NGOs, 2001).

School administrators of both CMC and DPSC schools as well as the Minister in charge of school education in West Bengal (for 20 years) emphasised child labour as the major impediment to education of poor children. The Minister when interviewed admitted that 'there are a large number of "uncovered children" between the ages of 5 and 10 years in Calcutta whom formal schools cannot reach because they have to earn their livelihood . . . So it may not be possible for them to go to schools in the daytime' (Interviews, Minister, 2001). Lack of physical access is seen as more of a problem in rural areas. The DI said that to expect parents to send children to school without ensuring livelihoods 'fails to take into account the social and economic realities of the poor' (Interviews, DI, 2001). The REC provides a different perspective on child labour, poverty and education. While acknowledging that parents withdraw children from schools and send them to work, the Commission observes that 'economically hard up parents soon discover that attendance in schools for one year – and even two years – has not meant any substantial improvement in the general level of awareness of their children or in the content of their learning. Such a realisation has sometimes led to the decision that it would make better sense to withdraw the children from school and to put them to work in fields or workshops, thereby adding immediately to the household income' (1992: 40–1).

NGOs acknowledged that child labour is still a widespread phenomenon among the poor. According to the Bengal Social Service League (BSSL) 'parents are compelled by socio-economic conditions to put their children to work. Only a large number of low paying jobs help individual families to survive.' FOCUS observes that '80 per cent of children living on footpaths, *jhompris* and along the canal will be labourers. In the city, there is so much easy money for children's work that there is bound to be child labour'. They were clear that a significant proportion of non-enrolment in schools and dropout results from children's involvement in work (Interviews, NGOs, 2001). However, CINI is quick to add that 'all children who are out-of-school are not child labour' (Interviews, CINI, 2001).

NGOs also emphasise the need to mobilise communities and create an awareness of the importance of sending children to school rather than to work. In fact some NGOs are playing an important role in

⁵⁰ Three kilograms of rice per child was being distributed from a special scheme of the government of India. The DI said this had begun from around the middle of 2000. Prior to this, DPSC schoolchildren were not receiving any mid-day meal/dry rations. The CMC had a practice of giving bread to children in its schools some years earlier. However this has since been discontinued (Interviews, 2001).

⁵¹ Around 5,000 children had to be brought to each centre where grain was being distributed. Teacher time was involved in maintaining records, distributing grain and so on.

working with poor communities, spreading awareness about education, encouraging children to go to school and providing them with academic (and at times financial support). The study by CINI, referred to earlier, reiterates the importance of motivating parents to send their children to school. However the importance of “educational support” to first generation learners is also highlighted. The study found that the “coaching support” of CINI through its centres was vital for children’s retention in school (CINI, n.d.: 2).

The need to ‘spread awareness among the masses so that they can send their children to schools’, is also emphasised by the Minister. He claimed that ‘the state government is undertaking “mass orientation” with the help of the concerned departments to create among the poor an eagerness to send their children to school’ (Interviews, Minister, 2001). The local ward counsellor also echoed similar views adding that ‘pupils in CMC schools are mainly children of maids. Mothers do not pay attention to their children. There is no one to guide them’ (Interviews, Counsellor, 2001). There is thus an emphasis on poverty and particularly child labour as well as “non conducive” home environments as underlying educational deprivation of poor children. This has tended to deflect attention away from very real issues such as inadequate physical access to schools, lack of resources, the dismal conditions under which learning takes place and the poor quality of instruction that poor children receive.

3.7 Strategies for universal primary education

In view of the objective of the LFG to universalise primary education (and improve its quality) by 2003, two strategies have been put in place: (a) to increase access to formal primary schools and improve their quality; and (b) to create alternative schools for those children who are unable or unwilling to attend regular formal schools. Increasing awareness of parents and encouraging community participation in education underlies both strategies, particularly that of alternative schooling.

3.7.1 Increasing access to schools and improving the quality of education

As mentioned earlier, the SRG survey estimated that existing primary schools would be in a position to offer admission to only 10,000 non-enrolled children. In addition, a process of rationalisation has been envisaged wherein students would be transferred from schools with very few students on the rolls and accommodated in nearby schools.⁵² The schools themselves would be shifted to areas where there was a demand for more schools. This process is expected to accommodate around 3,000 children. In other words, primary schools in Calcutta are in a position to accommodate only 13,000 of the estimated

⁵² There is also a move to increase the number of shifts in schools though most independent primary schools already have two shifts. Primary schools located within secondary school buildings obviously cannot have a second shift. Mention was also made of the upgrading of some primary schools to grade V. While it is a positive development in that children in these schools will be able to complete grade V within the same school, there are likely to be very few of such schools. Further it is unlikely that children from these schools will find it any easier to enter secondary schools as compared to children from schools with grade IV only. The CMC is also planning to start some model schools that will have up to grade VIII.

44,646 out-of-school children. It is surprising that neither teachers nor administrators have acknowledged that the number of primary schools is clearly smaller than that required if all children are to be in school. A Teacher Association (TA) representative for instance observed 'There is no shortage of schools in Calcutta. We do not agree that there are no schools for 30,000 children' (Interviews, 2001).

Improving school quality is officially seen in terms of equipping schools with minimal facilities and providing training and orientation to teachers. However, this requires an increase in the allocation of funds for primary education which does not appear to be forthcoming. The CMC has within its purview a large number of activities such as urban development, water supply, sanitation and so on that dominate the activities of the Corporation. Education is not the major responsibility of the CMC and receives only around 5 per cent of its annual budget. DPSC schools are also constrained for funds. When interviewed, the Minister said that West Bengal was spending the maximum proportion of a state budget on education and it was not possible to increase this amount.⁵³ Further, it was acknowledged that the primary school budget was spent mainly on salaries of teachers and staff leaving a relatively negligible amount for improvement of school quality (Interviews, Minister, 2001). It is increasingly being advocated that communities must participate in improving school infrastructure and support the government in this context. A DPSC official provides the government perspective in this regard, '... the improvement of infrastructure requires involvement of the community ... government and the community will go together, then only can we reach all children' (Interviews, DI, 2001).

3.7.2 Anandapath: the Joyful Learning programme

The Anandapath or Joyful Learning package was initiated by the Government of West Bengal in 1996. It is aimed at making education joyful and thereby schools attractive for the poorest of the poor.⁵⁴ The idea was to reach out to homeless/poor and working children who are unlikely to come to school if they do not find it interesting. Anandapath aims to make the school and its surroundings attractive by providing facilities for water and electricity, decorating the classrooms, etc. There is an input of training and orientation of teachers as well as the use of teaching aids in order to facilitate the participation of children and make learning enjoyable.⁵⁵ For instance there is emphasis on the use of song and dance to make learning enjoyable. Community awareness about education is emphasised and teachers, along with officials and inspectors, are expected to visit poor urban settlements and encourage children to join school.

⁵³ One of the possible sources of additional funding for schooling mentioned by the Minister is the funds that members of both houses of parliament (MPs) individually receive for the development of their constituencies. In one of the wards, it was observed that the local MP had donated Rs. 2 million for a school building from development funds he had received. However such funds depend on the initiative and goodwill of politicians and cannot be seen as a regular source of funding.

⁵⁴ Anandapath is a state-level programme run in collaboration with the UNICEF which provides funds for it. It was launched in the district of Calcutta in 50 CMC and DPSC schools in 1996 and subsequently expanded to 119 more schools. In the next phase it is to cover an additional 370 schools in and around Calcutta.

⁵⁵ In addition to training/orientations, resource centres are to provide academic support to clusters of schools. Teachers within that cluster are to regularly meet at the resource centres and share their experiences of the programme.

Periodic meetings are also to be held with parents to impress upon them the necessity of regular attendance in school, cleanliness among children and so on.

Anandapath (AP) is presently being implemented in grades I and II of 169 primary schools in Calcutta. Grades III and IV are yet to be brought under the programme. Head Teachers said that the AP programme has, to some extent, been able to attract children to schools. Though children's attendance did not significantly improve as a result of AP, those attending appear to be more interested and enthusiastic in class (School Survey 2001). The DEO observed that, initially, the use of song and dance as part of the strategy for joyful learning yielded good results. However once the novelty wears off, children tend to get bored. There has yet to be a focus on concrete skills and competencies to be acquired (Interviews, 2000). An official in the DPSC claimed that the AP programme has been able to bring down the student dropout rate from around 35 per cent to 9 per cent (Interview, DMC, 2000).

A number of constraints that AP faces are linked to the larger context of primary schooling in the city. For instance, school teachers observed that inadequate resources made available for the programme and shortage of teachers are major obstacles to the success of AP. While teaching aids required for AP are not adequately available, they claim that the programme is also difficult to implement in crowded classrooms (School Survey 2000). The DEO says that while training/orientation for AP is being conducted, the implementation of training inputs is problematic. According to him, 'barely 20–25 per cent of what is imparted during the training programme, is actually implemented within the classroom situation' (Interviews, 2000). Here he emphasises the importance of the resource centres that are to provide academic support to the programme. These centres were to work through teachers' meetings whereby teachers would meet to discuss their problems and evolve strategies that would be useful for the functioning of the programme. However this has not happened. Teachers of some schools did say that they attended meetings at the AP resource centre but said that there was not much discussion on the actual teaching of the programme (School Survey 2000). Monitoring of the programme is yet to be institutionalised.

3.7.3 Alternative schools for the poor

Alternative schools⁵⁶ are the main component of a city-wide strategy to provide primary education to all children in Calcutta by 2003. Around 32,500 children or 74 per cent of the estimated out-of-school children in Calcutta in 1999 were to be enrolled in alternative schools/centres. As has already been mentioned, alternative schools (AS) reflect a shift in policy of the GOWB. The AS programme or the SSP is characterised by a distinct perspective on educational deprivation that links non-enrolment of children in schools to poverty and the lack of community awareness of the importance of education.⁵⁷ The involvement of children in work is seen as a critical constraint in the enrolment and regular attendance of

⁵⁶ As will be discussed, there are two kinds of alternative schools envisaged. Shikshalayas and Shishu Shiksha Kendras. Shikshalayas (SS) and Bridge Courses (BC) are the two programmes of the Shikshalaya Prakalpa (SSP) run by NGOs of Calcutta.

⁵⁷ What was not stated was that there were no additional resources to bring all children to regular primary schools.

children in schools. This perspective has influenced the nature of educational provision envisaged. It is clearly understood that AS is for children ‘who are not able to go to the formal school because of the rigidity of its timings. The scheme will give priority to timings that suit children’ (Interviews, Minister, 2001). To meet the reality of children’s work, AS are to be flexible, with timings adjusted to the needs of children. They are to be conveniently located within poor settlements, and local communities are to be mobilised to participate in their functioning. The Deputy Municipal Commissioner (DMC) for instance says, ‘the main problem is that facilities are not according to demand. What is required for children who are not free in the morning, such as those who are involved in child labour, are evening and night classes and also timings that parents are happy with’ (Interviews, 2000).

Policy-makers also feel that organisations other than the government will be best suited to provide education for the poor. A senior government official, who has played a key role in the SSP, is clear that ‘poor children need a “different kind of treatment”. We cannot reach these children through normal government machinery – the kind of background they come from, the kind of places they live in’ (Interviews, SPD, 2001). Further, that ‘the very environment in which these children live is not at all congenial for education. So the conventional teacher will not be able to deliver the goods’ (Interviews, Minister, 2001). There has been an emphasis on the key role that NGOs will play in the alternative school programme through partnership with the government and community involvement.

NGOs appear to have gone along with the LFG’s line of thinking in that they concur with the understanding that the special needs of children, who are educationally deprived because of their involvement in work, need to be addressed through alternative modes of schooling.⁵⁸ CINI Asha while emphasising that the organisation believes in full-time regular education for all children says, ‘For a while, children can go through some kind of ‘bridge courses’,⁵⁹ but ultimately they have to be in a formal school. But given the existence of child labourers, temporarily there have to be non-formal schools to adjust with children’s timings’ (Interviews, CINI, 2001). BSSL also makes a distinction between the ideal (formal schools for all) and the reality: ‘children will work and it is important to have conveniently timed high quality non-formal schools for working children’. NGOs were seen to have the necessary skills to provide such education because of their “orientation” and their work with local communities’ (Interviews, NGOs: 2000).

⁵⁸ NGOs in India have taken varied positions in the child labour-poverty-education debate. For instance, there are many NGOs who go along with the official distinction made between hazardous and non-hazardous work and the categorisation of children engaged in the latter as child labour. There are others who strongly contest this distinction and emphasise that all children engaged in work of any kind must be regarded as child labour. In fact some go as far as to include all children who are not in school as child labour (or potential child labour). While the first group would favour non-formal and alternative modes of education that adjust to the needs of working children in terms of time, the second are unwilling to compromise on full-time formal school for all children.

⁵⁹ Bridge courses are short-term “non-formal” programmes that help build the necessary academic and social skills of children and thereby facilitate their entry into formal schools.

Two types of alternative schools/centres, outside formal schools, were proposed to meet the needs of educationally deprived children of Calcutta. These were:

- i. *Shishu Shiksha Kendra*. Shishu Shiksha Kendras or Child Education Centres would be set up by the Calcutta Municipal Corporation. One hundred such SSK would accommodate children who are unable to access formal schools. Each SSK would have 25 children and a teacher. Timings of the Kendra are to be according to local convenience. Around 2,500 children are to be brought under the SSK in Calcutta.
- ii. *Shikshalaya*. Alternative schools called Shikshalayas would be run by city level NGOs (under the SSP) and supported by the government. The NGOs would work under the network called City Level Programme of Action (CLPOA) that has been set up in Calcutta.⁶⁰ SS would cover around 30,000 children.
- iii. *Bridge Course*. In addition, NGOs would also run bridge courses to facilitate the mainstreaming of children who could be accommodated in regular primary schools. Around 7,500 children were expected to attend the bridge courses.

The discussion that follows specifically focuses on the bridge courses and the shikshalayas that are being run by NGOs of Calcutta.

4 Alternative schooling, NGOs and the education of the poor

NGOs in Calcutta were seen as having a unique advantage in addressing educational deprivation as many of them had been working for a number of years with poor communities. Some of them were specifically involved with non-formal educational programmes in the slums and with street children. Also significant was the fact that the city had a registered network of NGOs, the CLPOA, that could bring them together on a platform. The CLPOA was initially able to bring around 50 NGOs in the city to participate in the SRG survey of education in Calcutta conducted in 1999. According to the State Project Director (SPD) (DPEP), the formation of the SRGEDUC is significant in that it is an indication of the intention of the state government 'to work with different partners for the delivery of education to those hitherto deprived of it'. He says that it is unique because it is a government programme that is run by NGOs. 'There has never before been a government-NGO partnership in the state. We are now talking of NGOs and governmental efforts that would fit into a common plan and through this partnership we can work towards achieving the goal of education for the poor' (Interviews, SPD, 2001). NGOs also find that the

⁶⁰ The origin of the CLPOA dates back to the early 1990s when the government of India provided a fund for setting up a taskforce for recommendations for street and working children and subsequently for the setting up of a nodal organisation along with the police and NGOs. It was only in Calcutta that a nodal organisation was formed with five city NGOs. This was initially an informal body of NGOs, which was supported by UNICEF. The CLPOA is now a registered body. The CLPOA has been able to bring together a large number of NGOs who are working in the area of education, health and other aspects of child welfare. It networks with funding organisations that provide NGOs assistance in obtaining financial support for their programmes.

state government is today inviting them to work in areas such as education, acknowledging their 'special expertise and experience' (Interviews, IPER, 2001).

As mentioned earlier, the first task taken up by the NGOs in 1999 was to conduct a survey of the number of children who were out-of-school. The findings are given in Table 3.1. The SRG survey also explored the extent of vacancies available for non-school going children in DPSC/CMC schools. It estimated that there would be places for 10,000 children in the existing schools in the academic session of 2001/2. Around 2,500 children in the regular school entry age of 5 to 6 years could be directly admitted to school against existing vacancies with the mobilisation of local communities. The remaining 7,500 vacancies were for children in the age group of 7–9 years. It was felt that it would be necessary to run around 300 bridge courses to mainstream children in this older age group as most of them would have had no prior exposure to the system of formal education, its curricula and pedagogy. NGOs agreed to run these bridge courses. A further 600 alternative schools or SS for 30,000 children in the 5 to 9 year age group would be run by NGOs.

The bridge course and the shikshalaya were envisaged as the collaborative effort of NGOs in Calcutta. CINI Asha, Loretto Day School Sealdah (LDS) and the CLPOA would be the implementing partners of the programme with support from the state government and the DPEP. Funding was expected from the programme of Alternative and Innovative Education under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan of the government of India. The CLPOA was to play a coordinating and networking role. CINI Asha would coordinate the finances and administration of the programme while LDS was given the responsibility for its academic component. The SRG programme initiated in 2000 is still in its infancy and it is obvious that there is a need to give it time before an attempt is made at evaluating it. However it was felt that it would be important to ask the main actors in the programme – NGOs, teachers and administrators – to reflect on their experiences in order to understand some of the larger issues that such an initiative raises for the education of children of the poor. The first round of fieldwork for this study coincided with the training of the bridge course instructors (BCI), around October 2000. The second round of fieldwork began in September 2001 when the bridge courses had been completed and 226 SS, more than a third of the proposed number, had been set up. In-depth interviews were held with the CLPOA, Cyril of LDS, CINI Asha and three other NGOs⁶¹ (two of which were also resource centres of SS as well as implementing centres of the programme), shikshalaya teachers, the then SPD (DPEP) etc.

4.1 The bridge course

As mentioned earlier, around 300 bridge courses were to cover 7,500 children in the 7 to 9 year age group. As these children were to be mainstreamed into regular schools, bridge course centres were to be located near DPSC/CMC schools where vacancies were identified. The bridge courses were to be completed prior

⁶¹ The NGOs were Bengal Social Service League (BSSL), Bikas Bharati Welfare Society (BBWS) and Forum of Communities United in Service (FOCUS). Some discussions were also held with the head of Institute of Psychological and Educational Research (IPER). Interviews with BBSL, BBKS and FOCUS in the text are referenced under Interviews, NGOs, 2001.

to May 2001 so that children could be admitted in that academic session. Shikshalayas were also to get off the ground during this period. A detailed structured training programme for the bridge course was planned by Loretto Day School.

There were initial delays in getting the training of bridge course instructors (BCI) off the ground as the funds expected to be released from the central government under the AIE scheme of the SSA around May 2000 did not arrive even in September of the year. In September 2001, the academic coordinator of the programme, at her own initiative, approached UNICEF for funds and began training of volunteers. Cyril recollects that, ‘within five days I had 166 bridge course trainees on my hands and another 134 in the second batch’.⁶² Looking back at the first phase of the bridge course training, Cyril felt that the training had been able to ‘build in the trainees the capacity to think and to see from day to day, how I am going? What are my mistakes? We are trying to build these people into reflective individuals’ (Interviews, 2000).

The bridge courses were wound up in July 2001. What did the programme achieve? What were the problems experienced? What lessons were learnt and how were these incorporated into the SS programme that followed? In terms of targets, the BC centres fell short – both in the number of children covered by the programme as well as those mainstreamed into regular primary schools. Around 5,500, as against the target of 7,500 children aged 7 to 9 years, were actually covered by the programme. There were a number of reasons for this. Bridge course centres were to be located near DPSC/CMC schools with vacancies in order to facilitate school entry. However in a number of cases BC centres were “wrongly” located leading to the cancellation of these centres. In some centres, children admitted to the BC were aged six years or less, a group that was not being targeted by the programme.⁶³ In other areas, regular school students were using BC centres as “coaching” centres after school hours. These were probably NGO tutorial/coaching centres. The net result was that 125 of the 300 BC centres were never set up, and around 2,000 children expected to be covered by the programme were never reached. Further, even among the children covered by the BC a significant proportion, (around 2,000) were below the targeted age group (Interviews Cyril, CLPOA, 2001).

There was also delay in receiving of textbooks in some centres. Bengali medium centres received their books on time. However this was not the case with Hindi medium centres which received textbooks only towards the end of the BC programme. In fact materials from the adult literacy programme were used for training of BCI as well as for teaching children in these centres (Cyril 2001).

The success of the SSP hinged on the magnitude of involvement of the NGOs. A serious drawback was that the involvement of NGOs in the BC programme was far less than than expected. NGOs were found to often locate BC centres where it was convenient for them and not where they were meant to be. It was also felt that the BCI could have received better support from their respective NGOs but they were

⁶² The training programme was for seven days. Bridge course instructors selected by the NGOs were given an initial training for five days and then sent to their areas for 15 days to start their centres, prepare their materials etc. They subsequently returned for two days when their work was reviewed, their plans checked and so on (Interviews, Cyril 2000).

⁶³ These children (of five, six years) were of the age of official school entry and could directly enter grade I in regular primary schools.

often left to fend for themselves. One of the reasons attributed to the less than desired involvement of NGOs was the lack of funds. NGOs were not provided funds for incidental expenses; only an honorarium was given to the BCI (Interviews, CLPOA; Cyril 2001).

Community mobilisation was an integral part of the programme and parents were to be encouraged to directly enroll their young children in school and send their older children to the bridge course centres. It was assumed that an NGO that had been working in an area for six to eight years would have already established a rapport with the community and could build upon it in order to mobilise parents to send their children to school. What was subsequently realised was that the community mobilisation and support, which was to be a major resource input of NGOs into the programme was weak. Many NGOs were merely offering services within an area – running a clinic, NFE center and so on. Other than for a few NGOs such as CINI Asha, the actual building up of local community support by NGOs was relatively absent (Interviews, Cyril 2001).

The concerned BCI along with their respective NGOs saw that children were admitted to schools against existing vacancies. A team of observers from the SRG helped BCI talk to school authorities and facilitate this process. It is estimated that around 3,700–4,000 of 5,500 children covered by the bridge courses were mainstreamed into regular schools in the academic year 2001–2002.⁶⁴ Were there any problems in admitting BC children to school? It appears that other than for the issue of birth certificates of children (which was subsequently sorted out),⁶⁵ schools did not object to admitting BC children. According to the CLPOA secretary, as many of the CMC schools did not have enough students, the admission of children in these schools was not problematic. However as has already been discussed, schools were unhappy about admitting over-age children. A mention was also made of the fact that the “admission test” was also a hurdle that was used to make school entry difficult in some instances. The NGO, BBWS, said that of the 450 children enrolled in their BC only 40 per cent completed the programme. Migration and involvement in work were two of the main reasons for dropout from the BC programme. Further, only around 46 children (10 per cent of their BC enrolment) were mainstreamed into local schools (Interviews, NGOs, 2001). BBWS said the organisation took the initiative in locating schools, taking care of admissions and providing financial assistance to enable children to go to school.

One of the main reasons why the BC coverage fell short of its target was seen to be the absence of a regular system of monitoring for the programme. It was hence not possible to adequately check that BC centres were in place, in the right location and covering the right children (i.e. targeted age group). Further linkages between organisations coordinating the programme and the NGOs implementing it were relatively weak (Interviews, Cyril, 2001). One of the main drawbacks of the programme according to Cyril was the absence of a follow up of BC children in schools. According to her this was partly because there were no funds allocated for this purpose. NGOs said that a follow-up, providing academic and financial

⁶⁴ There is some confusion regarding the actual number of children enrolled in BC and subsequently mainstreamed. These are tentative figures based on interviews with the CLPOA secretary and Cyril (2001).

⁶⁵ A government circular was issued to the effect that if the parents/guardians of the children certified the date of birth of the child it was to be accepted by the concerned school (Interviews, CLPOA, 2001).

support to BC children as well as motivating their parents (especially mothers), was critical. However, while some NGOs may be doing this on an individual basis it has not been built into the programme (Interviews, NGOs, 2001).

It is important to acknowledge that the BC has been able to bring a significant proportion of children, non-enrolled and beyond the age of school entry, into the programme and subsequently made the mainstreaming of children possible. Despite the fact that targets have not fully been met, this is no small achievement. The experience of the bridge course has highlighted the need for the planning and coordination of the education programme as well as its follow up.⁶⁶ Drawing up formalised procedures is seen as important, particularly given that a large number of NGOs were involved in the programme. This is acknowledged by the main actors in the programme: CINI, LDS and CLPOA. For them the bridge course has been a major learning experience and insights and lessons from the BC have been built into the subsequent shikshalaya programme (Interviews, CINI, Cyril, and CLPOA, 2001).

4.2 Shikshalaya

Alternative education centres called Shikshalayas (SS) aim to provide primary education to poor children in the city of Calcutta. These centres are run by NGOs through teacher volunteers called *sevaks* and *sevikas*.⁶⁷ *Sevaks/sevikas* are appointed on contract and receive a salary of Rs.1000 per month and NGOs are given some minimal resources for incidental expenses.⁶⁸ There are 50 children to two *sevaks* in each SS centre. Building on the insights from the bridge course experience, ongoing academic support to SS and monitoring of the programme has been envisaged at the outset and is to be provided by 10 Apex Resource Centres (each is to oversee 60 SS). A Project Management Unit (PMU) undertakes the administration and coordination of the programme and provides non-academic support as well. LDS is the academic coordinator of the programme and CINI Asha, is the PMU.

The larger perspective of the SSP is that ‘The SS will not be a parallel system to the CMC or government sponsored primary schools’. On the other hand it is visualised as a ‘stop gap arrangement’ that will address ‘short comings’ in existing educational facilities for children in the primary school going age group (Cyril 2001: 9). IPER observes that SS are ‘transit schools’ where children would be ‘prepared and then put into formal schools. They are like NFE centers run on a large scale’ (IPER 2001).

⁶⁶ In September 2001 a review committee was formed to follow up the BC children (Interviews, Cyril, 2001).

⁶⁷ *Sevaks* and *sevikas* receive training for 31 days spread over the year. The minimum qualification for a *sevak* has been laid down as grade X. Training includes practical methods of teaching and preparation and use of teaching aids. Cyril says that *sevikas* are ‘trained to work within the environment that they are likely to confront in the slums and poor settlements, “outside four walls” and with ordinary low cost materials’ (2001).

⁶⁸ Regular primary school teachers receive a monthly salary of Rs. 8,000 upwards. NGOs receive Rs. 300 per month for each SS centre in order to meet contingencies such as rent, electricity charges and other expenses (Interviews, Cyril, 2001).

The SS is to cover grades I to IV as in regular primary school so that equivalence with the latter is maintained. It has been officially agreed that the children from SS will be eligible to continue their education in grade V in regular upper primary schools. One of the key organisers of the SS clearly stated that, ‘the attempt will be to see that by the end of four years every SS child should be able to cope with class V of the formal government school. As children come to this level we will have to force the government to expand the system to absorb them gradually’ (Interviews, Cyril, 2000). SS centres are housed in community clubs (and other locally available spaces). This is not only because these centres are seen as temporary, but also that creating new buildings is not an economically viable proposition. Teaching is for three hours and can be held between 8 am and 5 pm. The actual duration of the centre is decided by the local NGO. One of the problems that are being faced is lack of adequate space to run the centres. Community clubs that are located within the slums are being used for other purposes as well and this sets limits to the flexibility of timings of the SS. In some instances, NGOs found that local clubs were often unwilling to provide space for the SS and were on the look out for commercial ventures that would yield more lucrative rents (Interviews, NGOs, 2001).

The SSP began in July 2001 with initial funding from the central government under the AIE programme of the government of India.⁶⁹ As mentioned earlier, by October 2001 (when the second round of fieldwork was being undertaken for this study), there were 226 shikshalayas functioning in the city of Calcutta. 33 NGOs were participating in the programme. Are shikshalaya likely to provide education that is accessible and of reasonable quality to poor children?

4.3 Access to alternative schools

By October 2001, around 11,000 children were estimated to have been covered by the SS (a little over a third of the targeted out-of-school children). SS centres are located within poor settlements and teachers are usually from within these settlements or from nearby localities. Serious problems have been encountered in identifying and locating out-of-school children. A large number of children who were listed as “non-enrolled” by the earlier SRG survey (1999) could not be located when the SS began in 2001 (Interviews, NGOs, 2001). The organisers of the SSP said that factors such as migration, razing of squatter settlements and city clean-up operations in the interim period had uprooted many families from their original settlements (Interviews, Cyril, CINI, 2001). However SRG survey estimates that were based

⁶⁹ The total cost of the SSP (SS and BC as well as SSK) is estimated at over 100 million. Around 10 million is expected from the government of India, from programmes, such as the Education Guarantee Scheme and Alternative and Innovative Education. It is expected that resources will be mobilised from international organisations such as UNICEF as well as the corporate sector (GOWB 2001: 51).

on surveys done by individual NGOs are also contested⁷⁰ (Interviews, DI, 2001). There was a feeling among the organisers that another quick survey by NGOs may be necessary to confirm the number of out-of-school children and their location.

What is important is that authentic and complete information on the educational status of poor children and the location of all those who are not enrolled in schools are yet to be obtained. Such information is necessary for providing education to these children regardless of how it is provided. The lack of “visibility” of non-enrolled poor children is likely to exclude them from access to formal as well as alternative schooling systems.

4.4 Alternative schooling, poverty and the working child

Have SS been able to bring the working child to school? What NGOs and *sevaks* have observed is that children who are involved in domestic chores and who assist their parents in income generation activities within the home have been enrolled in SS. Though attendance may be irregular, some of these children have been able to combine work and education. This is seen to lead to a drastic reduction in recreation time for such children. However SS has had no effect on full-time child labourers who do not join the SS. In fact, entry into work or greater involvement in home-based labour, especially as children grow older, is responsible for dropout from the centres. One of the NGOs felt that the provision of mid-day meals to children within SS might prevent or postpone dropout. Mid-day meals are presently not provided in SS (Interviews, NGOs, 2001).

However it is not work alone that constrains entry and attendance in SS. One of the reasons cited for children not attending SS was that young children often go to play instead of coming to the centres. Where NGOs have established rapport with the community and *sevaks* take an interest, children’s attendance is monitored. *Sevaks* follow up on children, go into the slums, and bring them to the SS.⁷¹

4.5 Quality of education

Quality is likely to be the major issue where alternative schooling is concerned. As mentioned, SS have been planned as multi-grade centres with 50 children and two *sevaks* in each centre. A *Sevak* emphasised that ‘we have no control over the facilities available and make do with what is provided by youth clubs. The rooms are small, walls are of poor quality and cannot be used for display, and there is no storage space for our materials . . .’ (Interviews, SS teachers, 2001). The feedback both from NGOs and the

⁷⁰ Headmasters of local schools, as well as the officials in the CMC/DPSC, challenge the authenticity of the number of out-of-school children that emerged in the SRG survey. In July 1999, prior to the SRG survey, CMC announced a survey by local schools. Headmasters organised the survey in different localities to find out the number of non-enrolled children. The number of out-of-school children that emerged in this survey was far smaller than that in the SRG survey. Cyril however, says the survey conducted by the CMC schools was methodologically problematic as it was unable to demarcate the areas that would be covered by each school. The survey was also completed within a week’s time. According to her the NGO conducted SRG survey was far more systematic (Interviews, 2001)

⁷¹ NGOs such as CINI Asha have played a critical role in shifting children from work to school. The slums in which they work were earlier areas where child labour was predominant. They have today succeeded in creating a norm among the families they work with that children must go to school. However CINI activists spoke of the slow process of raising awareness among parents (Interviews, CINI, 2001).

sevaks was that teaching 50 children of varying ages is a difficult proposition. *Sevaks* interviewed said they found it trying to manage a crowd of children often within physical spaces that are relatively small. More important, they were not trained to teach a varied age group. It must be remembered that sevaks have often only completed X grade and receive barely 31 days of training spread over a year. They are likely to have been trained only for grades I and II. In most cases SS teachers are expected to devise their own strategies while teaching. A *sevika* observed:

Teaching in groups is the most difficult part due to the wide age ranges of children in the SS. Children keep fighting so it is difficult to organise them. Very often children, instead of doing their work, gatecrash into another group. When I asked the supervisor for help, she told me to solve the problem myself. What we do is to give some responsibility to the older children to help manage the young ones. Most of what we teach is for little children. So the older children are relatively free.

(Interviews, SS teachers, 2001)

What appears to be happening is that the *sevaks* tend to concentrate on younger children and try to hold their interest. The older children are left to their own devices or are given some responsibility *vis-à-vis* the younger children. According to SS teachers, ‘children who are older are able to grasp whatever they are taught easily, so we do not pay much attention to them. Younger children take more of our time’. However, *sevaks* did find that older children, some of whom were dropouts from regular school, ‘are getting very bored and are likely to discontinue SS also’ (Interviews, SS teachers, 2001). NGOs felt that the present structure of SS (multi grade teaching, two sevaks and 50 children in one room) is unlikely to facilitate learning. They emphasised the need to rethink the structure of SS and provide on going academic support that *sevaks* need (Interviews, NGOs, 2001).

In the larger context of the quality of education offered by the SS it is pertinent that the programme is being run with the minimum of funds. The average running cost budgeted per SS is around Rs. 730 per child per year.⁷² As mentioned, NGOs received barely Rs. 300 per month for each SS centre to meet incidental expenses. There was also considerable subsidy of the programme by sheer voluntary effort that was not being factored in. Cyril is critical of the manner in which decisions regarding costs have been made arbitrarily without considerations of how it impinges on the quality of education provided (Interviews, 2001).

⁷² This works out to Rs. 36,860 per year for one SS, two sevaks and 50 children. This includes the honorarium of two sevkas, teaching learning materials, setting-up costs and training of sevaks (SSP document).

5 Summary and conclusions

The foregoing discussion on educational deprivation among Calcutta's poor has been placed within the larger context of public provision of schooling in West Bengal (structure, nature of access and quality) as well as alternative modes of educational delivery that are today reflected in official thinking in the state. It raises not merely the issue of whether there are opportunities for schooling for those who have been hitherto deprived of education, but more importantly, how equitable such education is.

West Bengal has recorded significant achievements in the betterment of the lives of the poor, particularly in rural areas. In comparison, its performance in education, even at the primary stage has been relatively poor. A significant proportion of children continue to remain out-of-school. Out-of-school children are mainly from poor and traditionally deprived social groups (such as *dalits* and *adivasis*) as well as Muslims. The state government has set before itself the target of universal primary education (bringing all children in the primary school age group to school) by the year 2003 and has initiated a number of programmes towards this objective. Will the state be able to ensure even primary education for all children? The present study of Calcutta is of importance not only because it is the state capital and presents the best case scenario for Universal Primary Education (UPE) but also because it is the focus of a city wide programme run by NGOs to bring all children to school. The section that follows presents a brief summary of the discussions and the main conclusions.

Primary schooling in the state is mainly publicly funded and managed (by local bodies). Primary schools comprise only grades I–IV while grade V is located mainly in upper primary sections attached to secondary/higher secondary schools. *The sharp pyramid-like structure of school education ensures that only a small proportion of children who enter primary school will have physical access to grade V or complete primary education. In other words UPE is still not on the agenda of the state and its target for 2003 is probably only universal primary schooling i.e. till grade IV.* Further, the quality of education is poor and the most basic facilities and amenities are not available in a significant proportion of primary schools. This points to neglect of basic education in West Bengal even after 1977 when the LFG came to power. *The LFG failed to integrate the attainment of adult literacy and universal elementary education into its programme of change that was directed primarily towards agrarian reform.*

Provision of primary schooling is inadequate in the state and a large number of rural habitations are without schools. Even in Calcutta, primary schools that are currently available are not in a position to accommodate all out-of-school children. The SRG survey (1999) indicated that there were only 10,000 vacant places in primary schools (local body managed DPSC and CMC schools) whereas more than 44,600 children in the 5 to 9 year age group were not in school. *Thus, inadequate access even to primary schooling is likely to be a serious constraint in bringing all children to school.*

Children who enter primary sections of composite schools (secondary and higher secondary) have access to grade V within the same school. Further such schools (most of which are privately managed and cater to relatively well-off families) are also of better quality than local body managed independent primary schools to which the poor have greater access. However local body managed schools are themselves structurally differentiated in that children who are enrolled in DPSC schools that are located in

secondary/higher secondary school buildings are given preference in admission to grade V in the latter. These schools are also of better quality as they share facilities of the larger school. Only a little more than a third of DPSC schools are so located. Such schools are in demand by sections of the middle class and better-off families from the lower middle class while children of the poor are mainly found in primary schools with their own (or rented) premises. *Thus the primary school system is stratified in terms of continuity in education (access to grade V and higher levels of schooling) as well as quality of education provided.*

As compared to West Bengal in general, primary schools in Calcutta are relatively better provided with basic facilities for education. However, a large number of schools still lack drinking water, minimum number of classrooms and other facilities thereby providing a dismal environment for children to learn in. Programmes like the Anandapath or joyful learning do not seek to improve the basic conditions under which teaching and learning take place. *Unattractive school environments are likely to be partly responsible for dropout of children from primary schools.*

The poor functioning of schools and the failure of teachers to discharge their roles adequately is a serious problem that plagues primary school education in the state. There are a number of factors responsible for this in addition to the relative lack of facilities and resources in schools. Many schools still lack the required number of teachers leading to relatively high TPRs in these schools. This has an adverse effect on the learning environment that the school provides and the quality of classroom instruction. However, the poor quality of classroom instruction (that is reported) also arises from the fact that almost half the primary teachers in the city lack pre-service professional training. Further, ongoing academic support for teachers is almost non-existent though some efforts have been made in this direction in recent years. DPSC and CMC schools are increasingly catering to children of poor and non-literate families residing in slums and poorer settlements. These children lack the academic and social skills that children from more educated backgrounds bring to school. No serious attempt has been made to equip teachers with the orientation and competencies to address the educational and social needs of slum children. On the other hand it is also clear that the issue is not merely one of orientation and competencies but of poor teacher accountability as well. As the REC has stated, teachers play “truant” because they are catering to children from slums. There is also no effective system of monitoring.

West Bengal had a powerful teachers’ movement and their demands for better service conditions and other benefits were met after the LFG came to power. Teachers are also represented on key bodies evolved for governance of education (WBBPE and DPSC). Teacher associations bearing allegiance to the ruling party have played an important role in mobilising support for the LFG and implementing programmes of the state government. However, *teacher associations have failed to play an effective role in ensuring proper school functioning. Issues that are of critical importance to the quality of primary education such as teacher accountability to children and their parents, professional development of teachers, the educational needs of first generation learners and so on, have not been of major concern to teachers associations.*

Educational governance as visualised by the LFG, (through elected bodies such as the WBBPE, DPSC as well as the SWC) was intended to be decentralised as well as participatory. With representation provided for teachers as well as the public, these bodies could have played an important role in addressing

critical issues in education as well as in building an element of institutional accountability. However until 2000 DPSCs were nominated bodies and school welfare committees have not as yet been formed. This may be partly why *decentralisation of primary education appears to have been unable to unleash energies that may have positively influenced the functioning of schools and addressed the educational needs of children.*⁷³

Given the larger context of inadequate access and poor quality of schooling, it is significant that teachers and school administrators put the onus of non-enrolment, dropout and poor performance of slum children on their social backgrounds, particularly the family's need for labour of the child. Parents are also seen to fail to provide the motivation and support needed to sustain them through school. In other words the roots of educational deprivation are traced to the home environments of children absolving schools and teachers of any responsibility in this context. *The linking of poverty and child labour to non-enrolment of children in schools has resulted in deflecting attention from the dismal state of primary schooling (and lack of resources for education), to the family and community environments that children come from. It has also led to the advocacy of an alternative mode of educational delivery to meet the special needs of children of the poor.* Alternative schools that will provide education, equivalent to that provided in regular formal schools but easily accessible and conveniently timed, is seen as the appropriate institutional response to educational deprivation among the poor. Further, it is felt that NGOs (in Calcutta and other urban areas and panchayats in rural areas) who are working among the poor are likely to be best equipped to provide alternative schooling.

The Alternative School Programme (SSP) currently underway in Calcutta has been able to provide education to a significant number of children (around 11,000 in the first few months of the programme) who were hitherto out-of-school. In that sense it has increased educational opportunities for children from the slums and pavements of Calcutta. However, the programme raises a number of issues that are of pertinence to the education of poor children. For instance it is officially maintained that alternative schooling is an ad-hoc, temporary measure to reach out-of-school children. However as discussed, DPSC and CMC schools are currently not in a position to accommodate all out-of-school children and the situation appears unlikely to significantly improve in the future. It *appears that the AS may turn out to be a permanent solution that the state will adopt to provide education to a section of poor children.*

The quality of education that AS provides is of concern. Shikshalayas (as AS are called in Calcutta), are low cost, single room, multi-grade centres located in temporary spaces with teachers or *sevaks* who are poorly qualified and receive very little training. These norms set limits to the quality of education that can be provided regardless of how motivated NGOs and *sevaks* running the programme may be. Thus, while SS will increase access of the poor to some form of primary schooling, the quality of education made available to them is likely to be poor. This is likely to impinge on the retention of children in AS and the basic competencies they attain. *In other words, primary schooling is likely to be further stratified and disparities in the quality of education received by different strata of children are likely to increase.*

⁷³ There is a feeling in some quarters that the LFG should have entrusted the panchayats with the management of primary education, with adequate provision for necessary institutionalised academic support, rather than create alternate autonomous structures for this purpose. As mentioned earlier, the panchayats played a crucial role in implementing the economic agenda of the LFG. They also coordinated the relatively successful literacy campaign and are presently responsible for the rapid spread of SSK in rural areas.

There is also the issue of continuity in education for SS children when they complete four years in SS. Though officially it is claimed that SS children will be provided access to grade V in regular upper primary schools if they wish to continue their education, the foregoing discussion has highlighted the lack of access to upper primary schooling.⁷⁴ The key organisers in the SSP (CINI and CLPOA), are of the view that they will be able to build pressure on the LFG to increase the number of upper primary schools in the city if a large number of SS children can be made ready for admission to grade V (Interviews, CLPOA, 2001). *The state has been unable to provide adequate access to upper primary schooling for children coming from the regular DPSC and CMC primary schools and is unlikely to be persuaded to do so for alternative school children.*⁷⁵

Alternative schools are also seen to widen disparities within the teaching community at the primary level, in terms of salaries and professional development. They are seen to have led to the creation of a cadre of low paid and poorly trained teachers on contract.⁷⁶ Acharya, a former teacher association activist, points to the larger fall-out of NGO run alternative schools. He says that ‘NGOs have whittled down the achievements of the teachers movement by engaging low paid and poorly trained individuals to teach without security of service . . . This will in a way sabotage the formal system (which engages teachers on a regular salary) but at the same time it will not be able to deliver the goals’ (Interviews, Acharya, 2001).

What is more important is that *the creation of a parallel system of AS ostensibly to meet the special needs of poor children is likely to draw attention away from the institutional context in which education is currently being made available to the majority of children.* The poor functioning of regular schools and the failure of teachers to discharge their responsibilities adequately has to be held up to scrutiny if poor children who have managed to enter regular primary schools are to receive an equitable education. However the government may actually see the AS (and the SSK) as an easier (and cheaper) option by which educational targets may be formally achieved through a more manageable cadre of teachers on contract, rather than by attempting to enforce norms for institutional functioning which may be resisted by the politically well organised regular teachers. On the other hand, what may also result is the further neglect of regular teacher education, particularly pre-service training and ongoing pedagogic support that is critical if teachers are to be equipped to cater to the educational needs of poor children.

As mentioned earlier, there is a distinct shift in the state government policy towards encouraging NGOs to participate in the provision of primary education to the poor in urban areas. Less than a decade ago these organisations were barely acknowledged. Today the official position is that ‘NGOs and government must work together’ (Interviews, SPD, 2001). NGOs say that recognition of their work and partnership with the government has provided greater space for their work. They have played an important role in the spread of education among Calcutta’s poor. Community mobilisation to encourage

⁷⁴ The Minister himself floats the myth of availability of space for SS children within upper primary schools. Referring to the future of SS children he says ‘If they are willing they will be accommodated in the formal schools. There is no problem’ (Interview, Minister, 2001: 28).

⁷⁵ There is also the suggestion the NGOs themselves may be required to extend the SS to the upper primary stage as well.

⁷⁶ It is interesting that teacher association representatives appear to distance themselves from SS teachers on the grounds that ‘shikshalayas are non formal schools that are concerned with the spread of literacy; they are not taking the place of formal schools’ (Interviews, TAR, 2001).

parents to send their children to school and retain them there and academic support to children to address the failures of the school system are critical as immediate measures to facilitate the spread of education within the larger context of poverty, insecurity and poor school quality. NGOs have played a crucial role in this context as the excellent work of organisations such as CINI Asha – in bringing child workers from the slums to school – has shown. *However what needs to be guarded against is the shifting of responsibility of providing primary education (to the urban poor), to the NGOs through alternative schools. NGOs often lack the resources – financial and human – as well as organisational skills and are a diverse group in terms of competencies and commitment.⁷⁷ They are hence unlikely to be able to sustain a large-scale educational programme.*

Poor parents are not unaware of differentiation in school quality. The shifting of children by poor parents to what they perceive as “better quality” DPSC schools, and to those that appear to ensure continuity in education, as well as the phenomenon of private tutoring at considerable cost, clearly indicate that they are in search of better quality of education for their children. *However the search for “good quality” education is left to the individual parent rather than addressed at the institutional level.* Where there are active and committed NGOs such as CINI Asha, they have taken on some of the burden of educational insecurity from individual parents. CINI for instance, provides preparatory centres for pre-school children, coaching centres for those in school, and bridge courses and camps for older children. They have also taken on the task of admitting children to local schools and follow-up with teachers, thereby facilitating the access of the poor to the formal school system. Poor parents also evolve their own strategies to avail of both subsidies in education as well as quality education for their children. For instance, it was mentioned by some teachers that parents often enroll children in the state funded primary schools (for textbooks, dry rations), NGO centres (for free coaching and free food where provided) and if they can afford it, in private schools (for “good” education). The search for “good” quality education amidst a poorly functioning school system is also leading to the mushrooming of privately managed unregulated pre-primary and primary schools. As mentioned it has also resulted in the phenomenal spread of private coaching/tutoring even among the poor. *These forms of growing privatisation of education can have only deleterious consequences for the spread of education in general and that among the poor in particular.*

Poverty is a major constraint in the education of Calcutta’s poor, and both the costs of schooling as well as children’s work are obstacles to the spread of education. On the one hand, it is important to remember that work *per se* is not the main deterrent to school entry of very young children. On the other, it is true that older children (often still within the primary school going age) do enter work outside the home or are involved to a greater extent in income generating activity within the home. Hence issues such as insecurity of livelihoods, parental perceptions of the relevance of schooling, as well as the presence of a large informal sector where work for children is easily available, are critical to the universalisation of primary/elementary education. However an emphasis primarily on the linkages between poverty, child

⁷⁷ One of the RCs commented that the ‘integrity of some NGOs and their lack of internal coordination has also been a problem’ (Interviews, 2001). It should be mentioned that that professionals within the NGO sector who have built a reputation for competence and commitment are very often whisked away by international organisations leaving a considerable void behind.

labour and non-enrolment in schools fails to address the magnitude of educational deprivation that results from the institutional context in which schooling is provided to the poor. *The iniquitous nature of educational provision that is inadequate in its availability and differentiated in its quality must receive critical attention if equitable education is to become a fundamental right of the poor.* Ensuring the accountability of the state and its institutions as well as the commitment of civil society (political parties, NGOs, local communities) will be critical in this context.

Annex

Details of interviews conducted in Calcutta and referred to in the text

Person/Organisations	Year	Details of interviewee (s)
Administrators		
APD	2000	Assistant Project Director, District Primary Education Programme, West Bengal.
DI	2000, 2001	Deputy Inspector of Schools, District Primary School Council, Kolkata.
DMC	2000, 2001	Deputy Municipal Commissioner, Calcutta Municipal Corporation, Kolkata.
DEO	2000, 2001	Deputy Education Officer, CMC, Kolkata.
Minister	2001	Minister of School Education, West Bengal.
Counsellor	2001	Ward Counsellor, CMC, Kolkata.
SPD	2001	State Project Director, District Primary Education Programme, West Bengal.
Teachers		
Head Teachers	2001	Head Teachers of primary schools (3 Head Teachers from 2 DPSC and 1 CMC school).
School Survey	2000	Primary school teachers (part of School Survey 2000: survey of 11 schools).
CINI teachers	2001	Teachers in the coaching centres of CINI Asha
SS teachers	2001	Teachers of the shikshalayas run by CINI Asha.
Howrah teachers	2001	Teachers in the non formal/coaching centre of the Howrah Project, Howrah.
Shikshalaya Prakalpa		
CLPOA	2000, 2001	Secretary, City Level Programme of Action, Kolkata.
Cyril	2000, 2001	Sister Cyril, Principal, Loretto Day School, Sealdah, Kolkata. Academic Coordinator, SSP.
CINI	2000, 2001	Director, Programme officer, etc. CINI Asha, Programme Management Unit, SSP, Kolkata.
BBWS*	2001	Director, Bikas Bharati Welfare Society, Kolkata, resource centre and implementing organisation, SS.
BSSL*	2001	Director, Bengal Social Service League, Kolkata, resource centre and implementing organisation, SSP.
FOCUS*	2001	Director, Forum of Committees United in Service, Kolkata. implementing organisation, SS.
IPER	2001	Director, Institute of Psychological and Educational Research, Kolkata.
Other Interviews		
TA/R	2001	Teacher' association/representatives, West Bengal Primary Teacher Association. Kolkata.
Parents	2001	Brief interviews with three groups of parents.
Children	2001	Discussions in schools, CINI coaching centre.
Acharya	2001	Acharya P., former teacher activist and academic.
Chattopadhyaya	2001	Chattopadhyaya R., academic, Indian Institute of Management, Kolkata.

* Referenced as Interviews, NGOs, 2001.

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