

**Interim report on implementation of SSA in four districts of West Bengal
(Birbhum, Hugli, Murshidabad, Nadia)**

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We made several visits to all the four districts and had discussions with various officials and teachers. What we present below are our observations based on these discussions, reading of various reports obtained from district offices and detailed analysis of the DISE data.

1. Data for planning and implementation

- 1.1 The basic database for planning and implementation of SSA is supposed to be the DISE. But while preparing the district annual plan, one is not sure to what extent one can depend on the DISE data. And understandably, while drawing up the annual plan, the district offices usually make little use of the DISE data. By 'use' we mean extensive use of school level data, not just averages to be shown in the state level meetings.
- 1.2 The total number of schools seems to fluctuate from year to year in such a manner as to put one in serious doubt about the completeness of coverage of the school reports. Quite a few cases of anomalies have been found while analyzing the DISE 2007-08 and 2008-09 data. Various checks should be in place to ensure completeness of the data. While speaking to the persons in charge of the MIS cells one might be under the impression that there are certain 'systemic flaws' in the data management system itself. But it is difficult to be convinced by this argument for several reasons. The MHRD is responsible for designing the data format and all the states have been collecting and managing the data in the common format for more than ten years now. One wonders why such 'serious problems' have not been brought to the notice of the MHRD.
- 1.3 There is a very serious issue that requires immediate attention. The ratio of the number of primary to that of upper primary/secondary schools is the highest in West Bengal among all the states, which has been repeatedly pointed out by the Centre. The state government has questioned the rationale for using this ratio as an indicator of access to upper primary schooling by pointing out that while almost all the primary schools have only one section in class IV most upper primary/secondary schools in the state have more than one section in class V, which means that the appropriate ratio to compare should rather be the ratio of the number of sections in class IV to that in class V. This ratio turns out to be close to 2:1 for West Bengal. One could provide support to this claim straightaway drawing on the DISE data as it is supposed to include the number of sections in each class in every school. But unfortunately, the DISE data for West Bengal

does not provide this apparently innocuous piece of information that would become the bone of contention. On inquiry with the MIS cell we found that the space for this information in the school questionnaire was left blank in most cases, or filled with absurd numbers in some cases. This, we are afraid, is likely to embarrass the government next time the issue of the shortage of upper primary schools is again raised by Delhi.

1.4 Apart from the errors/anomalies/incompleteness, there is the problem of exclusion/inclusion of ongoing work. For example, 'additional classrooms required' must be based not only on the number of existing classrooms and the required number of classrooms but also on the classrooms that are at various stages of construction. Even the latest DISE data (2009-10) would be inadequate in this regard as it includes only classrooms that are ready for use. The data on classrooms at various stages of construction has to be obtained and updated by the district project engineer on a regular basis. The planning crucially depends on how accurate and up-to-date this data is. In the districts under review we found assistant engineers doing this job seriously. However, they face several problems in procuring utilization certificates (UC) from the VECs (from the Head Masters, effectively) within a reasonable length of time. We discuss them later.

1.5 One of the most important indicators of school quality is the pupil-teacher ratio. But the district project offices seem to have very little to do with this, as the recruitment and posting of teachers are entirely done by the DPSC. What is unfortunate is that in some districts the DPO is not even informed about the latest situation in this regard. Different districts have different degrees of coordination between the different arms of the government within the district. While in one district the DPO and the DPSC seem to work together, in other districts it is not the case. We take up this point about coordination again later.

2. Averages versus extremes:

2.1 The district officials tend to think of progress invariably in terms of district averages, even though all the indicators are computed at the circle level. The standard indicators are of two types: average type and the type that focuses on the bottom of the distribution. The pupil-teacher ratio for the district as a whole indicates one aspect, whereas the percentage of schools in the district with pupil-teacher ratios exceeding

sixty, for example, indicates an altogether different aspect of the situation in the district. The district officials must give more importance to the second. If the emphasis is put more on the bottom of the distribution, the average improves with a resultant equality in outcome. Our research shows that the areas that were generally backward in terms of the female literacy rate in 2001 have also lagged behind in terms of school infrastructure even in 2007-08, even though the average level of infrastructure has remarkably improved during this period. This, we suspect, would continue to be the case unless the implementation of SSA at the district level specifically addresses this issue with priority.

- 2.2 This problem of unevenness in school infrastructure is more serious in some districts than in others. In Hoogli and Nadia, inter-block disparities are much smaller compared to Birbhum. In Murshidabad, there are several blocks and municipalities where the pupil-teacher ratios and pupil-classroom ratios are rather high, and they have remained so for long. The following table is based on DISE 2008-09. Here we have taken 'only primary' schools. Even if we concede that things have since improved, the district office should closely monitor progress with updated information on what we should identify as 'special-focus areas'. This is in line with the recommendations of the 12th Joint Review Mission that stress the need for drawing up action plan based on detailed analyses of various disparities.

Table 1: Pupil-teacher ratio and student-classroom ratio in select blocks/municipalities (2008-09)

District	Block/Municipality	Pupil-Teacher Ratio	Student-Classroom Ratio
Murshidabad	Samsorganj	69	82
	Suti-II	73	94
	Raghunathganj-I	54	60
	Dhuliyani (M)	63	78
Nadia	Nakashipara	48	62
Birbhum	Murarai-II	62	73
	Murarai-I	52	59
Hugli	Champdani (M)	48	53

- 2.3 Some blocks, such as Rajnagar of Birbhum, face a special kind of problem. While the pupil-teacher ratio and student-classroom ratio are rather low, about 27 per cent of the primary schools in the block are single teacher schools, according to DISE 2008-09. This is due to the fact that enrolment in a large number of schools in the block is low. In the light of the RTE Act we need to evolve a clear policy guideline to address this kind of issue. A focus on the average PTR for the block may miss out this problem.
- 2.4 For example, in a study of 147 schools taken from all the nineteen blocks, conducted by the District Primary School Council of Birbhum in 2006, it was found that among the students who passed out of Class IV, on average 17.24 percent did not take admission in Class V. While for a good number of primary schools, almost all those who pass Class IV go to Class V, there are a few schools from which a large number of students drop out after Class IV. In the sample of 147 schools, 26 schools produced 75 percent of total dropout.
- 2.5 A recent report prepared by the Sarva Siksha Mission, Birbhum, draws a rather worrying picture¹. Between the cohorts of 1999-2000 and 2002-03, who are supposed to complete five years in 2004 and 2007, respectively, the overall rate of dropout has decreased very little – from 31.9 per cent to 27.5 per cent. What is of concern is that in as many as 10 CLRCs (among 32) the rates of dropout have actually increased.
- 2.6 These types of analyses should be frequently produced by the research cells of the districts. The districts like Birbhum and Murshidabad, where the research coordinators have been in place for a relatively longer duration, have produced a good deal of useful analytical reports. But in other districts, this particular activity suffered because the post of research coordinator lay vacant for considerable time. The recent transition rates and drop-out rates are not available for any of the four districts under focus, except Birbhum. More input from the research side has to enter into the process of annual plan.

3. Physical infrastructure:

- 3.1 Several problems appear to come in the way of timely completion of additional classrooms. Even though the planning and execution of additional classrooms are the responsibility of the VEC, in most cases the responsibility entirely falls on the head master. The head masters are often reluctant to take it up for good reasons. Some of them feel that it is 'unfairly thrust upon' them. In some cases, even though the fund was allocated in 2007-08, the construction has never started. In other cases, construction

¹ Comparative data analysis of the School Efficiency Study (Cohort Study) 2004 & 2007, Sarva Siksha Mission, Birbhum, 2009.

remains incomplete as the money has not been spent judiciously. But with repeated prodding from the project engineer, it has been observed that more utilization certificates can be obtained. In Nadia, for example, things have improved remarkably in the past couple of months, since the new engineer joined.

- 3.2 Some procedural problems also come in the way. In one district, the plan for additional classroom through vertical expansion has to pass through the engineer in the DPSC, and the engineer is not in a capacity to inspect all the sites in the entire district within a reasonable time. As a result the sanction gets delayed inordinately. Some coordination between the two engineers in the District Project Office of SSA and DPSC, respectively, could sort this out.

4. Out-of-school children

- 4.1 Bringing the out-of-school children back to school is perhaps the most challenging part of RTE Act. The Act suggests provision of bridge-course as the major strategy. However, no district has so far come up with an effective way of dealing with the problem. Apparently, Murshidabad district took a major enrolment drive during May-June of this year which produced remarkable results. The total number of OOSC in the 5+ to 8+ age group dropped from 38743 in April 2010 to only 1044 at the end of June 2010. In other words, 37699 children were brought to school, who had either been dropped out or had never enrolled. In the 9+ to 13+ age group, out of 12283 OOSC, 8077 were brought back to school. One wonders what happened afterwards. Did they regularly attend schools? In our visits to schools in future we would try to find it out.
- 4.2 However, on closer scrutiny, figures on OOSC reported by different official reports often do not seem compatible. The latest Annual Report of the Department of School Education gives OOSC for 2008, according to which the number of OOSC in 5+ to 8+ group in Murshidabad was 12909, which is far less than the number for April 2010 as provided by the district office (i.e. 38743). Can we conclude from the two that the number of OOSC in this age group increased three-fold during the past two years?
- 4.3 This takes us to the general problem of tracking any progress over time, given the overwhelming focus of the project offices on the current status. The research coordinators should be encouraged to produce reports taking into account a longer time period than a year. In the process time-series data compatibility problem is also likely to be taken care of.

5. **Strengthening research capacity at district level**

- 5.1 By research capacity we do not mean standard academic research output. The research cell at the district should be encouraged to generate observations on their own and inform the project officers. Currently, we suspect, most research coordinators produce 'reports' as and when the direction comes from the higher-up.
- 5.2 We were surprised to hear from a research coordinator that he/she was not aware of what the DISE data says about the district since it is managed by someone else. We suspect there is a lack of clarity on the role of the research coordinator and the potential usefulness of his/her work.

6. **Teachers' training**

- 6.1 Different districts perform differently in terms of carrying out the designated task of in-service teachers' training. Mention should be made of Hugli district as an exemplary case. This is the first district that has already trained the newly recruited primary teachers. We visited several training venues and observed the training process closely. We feel that the Hugli experience should be shared with others as a very good example of how dynamic a role the DIET can take up in imparting in-service training. The Principal of DIET in Hugli must be congratulated on that. We observed that there is no clear pattern on the degree of involvement of the DIETs in different districts in the training process. It is a pity that some DIETS have very marginal role in the decision process. DIETs should be given the leadership role on academic matters, while the DPOs manage the administrative side of the training programmes.
- 6.2 There is one very important issue that requires attention by the implementers of teachers' training programmes. Children usually make very uneven progress as they are graduated to higher classes. A teacher teaching in class IV, for example, faces a very heterogeneous class in terms of learning achievement. How can the teacher remedy this and pull all the children in a class to a similar learning level? This is the question that teachers repeatedly ask us. We need to address this with efforts from teachers as well as experts putting together.
- 6.3 One general issue shared by the pedagogy coordinators of several district is that the practice of printing training material in the district is creating problem with time management as it requires a clumsy tendering process and so on. Since the module is centrally prepared there is no reason why only the printing part should be decentralized. If at all it is necessary for administrative reason, then care should be

taken to send the material to the district sufficiently in advance so that the tendering process and all do not jeopardize the training schedule.

7. What we intend to do in the next few months

The districts are now half-way through the current plan period. It is now time to do a comprehensive evaluation of the initial six months. Besides other interim reports based on our visits and observations, we also plan to conduct a systematic survey of schools focusing on drop-outs at upper-primary and learning achievement at the primary level, the report on which may be submitted at the end of the current financial year.