

Teacher Unions: Who, Where and What they Think

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Abstract

The paper attempts to look at the various teacher associations operating in West Bengal, their role in education administration in the State, as well as their response to the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009. It finds that there are 16 registered associations in the State, with democratic organizational structures and varying political ideologies. They have important formal and informal roles in the education sphere, and their influence stems from there. As a result, their response to the RTE Act, which accords such an important role to teachers, needs to be taken, and is. The government should address their concerns by holding more consultations, and forming state specific rules, wherever required. It should also encourage the associations to spread awareness about the Act among other stakeholders, as it has the means to do so.

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List of Abbreviations

<i>ABBREVIATION</i>	<i>FULL FORM</i>
CPI(M)	Communist Party of India(Marxist)
RSP	Revolutionary Socialist Party
SUCI	Socialist Unity Centre of India
WBGSTA	West Bengal Government School Teachers' Association
ABTA	All Bengal Teachers' Association
ABPTA	All Bengal Primary Teachers' Association
WBTA	West Bengal Teachers' Association
WBPTA	West Bengal Primary Teachers' Association
BPTA	Bengal Primary Teachers' Association
RMSA	Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan
NFTW	National Foundation for Teachers' Welfare
SMC	School Management Committees
RTE	Right Of Children To Free And Compulsory Education Act 2009

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Devkanya Chakravarty

Background and Introduction

On 1 April 2010, the much-awaited Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009 came into force, eight years after the 86th amendment to the Constitution; making education a fundamental right, was passed.

The Act provides for a number of things, most importantly making education compulsory for all 6-14 year olds and free for a number of them. For the same purpose, the law directs the appropriate government to build primary schools within one kilometre of the neighbourhood and schools from class six to eight within three kilometres, and all of this in a period of three years. Moreover, children hitherto out of the schooling system may seek admission to the age-appropriate class and are entitled to special training to enable them to reach the same standard of academic achievement, as the rest of the class. This training however, may not exceed a period of two years. The appropriate government may also choose to provide pre-primary education for three to six year olds, but this is not a right of the child. Section 15 of the Act states that a student may seek admission until the end of an extended period- six months after the beginning of the academic session-and in fact even after that. Further, according to section 16 of the Act, no teacher may fail a child in any class until he/she completes his/her elementary education. The teacher is also liable to face disciplinary action if he/she physically punishes a student or inflicts mental harassment on the ward.

Among other things (like the duty of the parent to send the child to school) it also gives a list of duties for teachers including maintenance of regularity and punctuality in school attendance; completion of curriculum within the given time ; assessment of student achievement and conduction of regular Parent Teacher Associations (PTA) meetings. At the same time, teachers may no longer be deployed for any non-teaching activities, unless it is for election, census or disaster management related duties. In addition, the Act bars all teachers from extending private tuitions to students. The Act further underlines the importance of teachers with the greater emphasis on holistic development of the child and continuous and comprehensive evaluation replacing the traditional examination pattern of testing academic achievement. All of the above provisions thus highlight the centrality of teachers in ensuring that the right of the child to free and compulsory education is realised in practice.

At the same time, they will presumably be subject to more accountability with the establishment of School Management Committees (SMC) that as envisaged by the Act, will have parents forming 75 percent of the membership. The rest of the 25 percent members will comprise in equal proportion of elected representatives in the local government, teachers from the school and local educationists and school students. One of the main functions of the SMCs as enunciated by the Model Rules of the Act is to ensure the implementation of sections 24 and 28, both pertaining to duties of teachers.

The importance of teachers in general, and the role accorded to them in the Act in particular, necessitate that their response to the Act is given adequate importance. This and other similar issues in the sphere of education and teachers' welfare have been the

concern of teachers' associations in West Bengal, which are perceived to have considerable influence here.

In the paper, I set out to find the main teacher associations operating in West Bengal- structure and role of political parties in its functioning, role in the education administration and their response to the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009.

Accordingly, I find that there are 16 registered organisations in the state, all with diverse ideologies. They have democratic organisational structures, and in their own words, no political backing. As to their role in West Bengal, they have direct representation in the National Foundation for Teachers' Welfare, and indirectly in the West Bengal Boards of Primary and Secondary Education (which allows membership to teachers). Overall, the associations see the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education as positive, though in need of change, as far as some provisions are concerned.

The paper begins by introducing the associations met and their membership criteria, as also the role of the parties rumoured to be backing the association. Then it goes on to describe the structure of the All Bengal Teachers' Association (ABTA) as an example. Next, it enlists the areas where the associations have a formal role and tries to capture their influence in the State. In the penultimate section, the paper enumerates the objections that the various organisations have with the RTE Act 2009. The recommendations and conclusions follow.

Research Objectives-To study the teacher associations operating in West Bengal, their functions and influence in the context of Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009 the questions that the paper will aim to answer are-

- What are the associations operating in Kolkata, their structure and their role in education administration in the State?
- Have these associations been involved in the process of implementation of the RTE Act 2009?
- What are the basic demands of the associations in the implementation of the RTE Act 2009?

Research Methodology

- Interviews with office bearers in teacher associations
- Interviews with government officers responsible for implementation of the RTE Act 2009 and those involved in the education administration in the state
- Secondary research involving reading the relevant Acts, newspaper reports, media articles and available research papers

The Associations, Membership, and the Party

The first teacher association in the State, All Bengal Teachers' Association (ABTA), started in 1921, under the leadership of Prafulla Chandra Ray, to demand better working conditions for teachers. In the post-independence period however, it underwent several splits with the Headmasters' Association and the West Bengal Teachers' Association being the first ones to leave in the early 1950s. The other associations too, trace their origin to the ABTA. The main criteria for differentiating between the many teachers' associations in the State are based on membership and to

a certain extent, ideology. The following is the tabular presentation of all the associations that I have interviewed -

TEACHER ASSOCIATION	MEMBERSHIP
West Bengal Government School Teachers' Association (WBGSTA)	Teachers of all the Government schools(44) in the State
West Bengal Headmasters' Association	Headmasters, teachers, non-teaching staff of all schools recognised by the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education, West Bengal Council of Higher Secondary Education, CBSE, CISCE. Para teachers included as associate members
<i>Sara Bangla</i> Primary Teachers Association	Teachers from all recognised schools, Para teachers too are included
<i>Sara Bangla</i> Secondary Teachers Association	Same as above; teachers from secondary sections of the same schools
All Bengal Primary Teachers Association (ABPTA)	Teachers in schools under the WBPPE
All Bengal Teachers' Association(ABTA)	Teachers of all recognised institutions of the State
West Bengal Teachers Association(WBTA)	Teachers of all government aided schools
<i>Pouroshikshak Au Karmi Sangh</i>	Teachers in all the KMC run schools
West Bengal Primary Teachers' Association(WBPTA)	Primary teachers in schools under WBBPE
Bengal Primary Teachers' Association (BPTA)	Teachers of all government aided schools

TABLE 1-Teacher Associations Met and their Membership

Membership differs to the extent that the associations cater to the different schools. So for example, the West Bengal Government School Teachers' Association caters only to the teachers in the 44 government schools¹ in the State and is in fact the only association to do so, and though membership is not automatic or even compulsory, it is the norm. The other organisations however, cater to all recognised institutions, differing only to the extent of being for primary or secondary school teachers.

According to newspaper reports, eight of the ten associations contacted, have some sort of a political backing. While the Communist Party of India (Marxist) backs the ABTA and ABPTA, the Sara Bangla Associations have the support of Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP). The Congress reportedly backs the WBTA while SUCI lends its support to BPTA. All teachers maintain however, that the associations themselves are non-political, in the sense that there is no formal affiliation to any party. The teacher organisations mainly campaign in favour or against issues related to teachers' welfare and education in the State. Party membership is no criteria for membership to the association. They also admit that teachers are free to participate in party politics (which they do) in their personal capacities. For example, WBTA has mainly the followers of Congress and the Trinamul Congress while the Headmasters' Association has members and followers of all ideologies except that of CPI (M). The BPTA which the media terms as being SUCI controlled, calls itself anti-government. Only the associations backed by the CPM and the RSP accept any concurrence with the party's ideology and acknowledge the respective party's support.

¹ According to a survey conducted by West Bengal's education department, the state has only 92 government or government-sponsored schools (with 48 of those being sponsored) and 11,500 government-aided private secondary schools. The primary and upper primary schools number 106,354 (Sujoy Gupta, Educationworldonline, posted 5 May 2010)

According to office bearers of the associations met, the party plays no role in funding, with the annual contributions of the members sufficing for the same. Additionally, the associations publish question papers and other writings that also help raise money for the working of the association.

The organisations are not forthcoming on what role the party actually does play, though Ashok Chatterjee, General Secretary of the *Pouroshikshak au Karmi Sangha* admitted that the party dictates the level of aggression that the particular association adopts when making a certain demand. For example if the municipal board is run by the opposition party, the level of aggression with which a demand is made differs from the situation where the board is run by the same party backing the association.

In addition, Utpal Ray, General Secretary of ABTA, asserts that their teachers campaign for election candidates from the party backing their association (CPM). (See footnote 3)

Organisational Structure of the Associations

All the associations have similar structures with a many-tiered leadership going from the block to the district to the State. The associations at least ostensibly have a democratic decision making process where the demands and principles are formulated by the top leadership, who in general are elected by all the teacher members.

ABTA has the following structure:

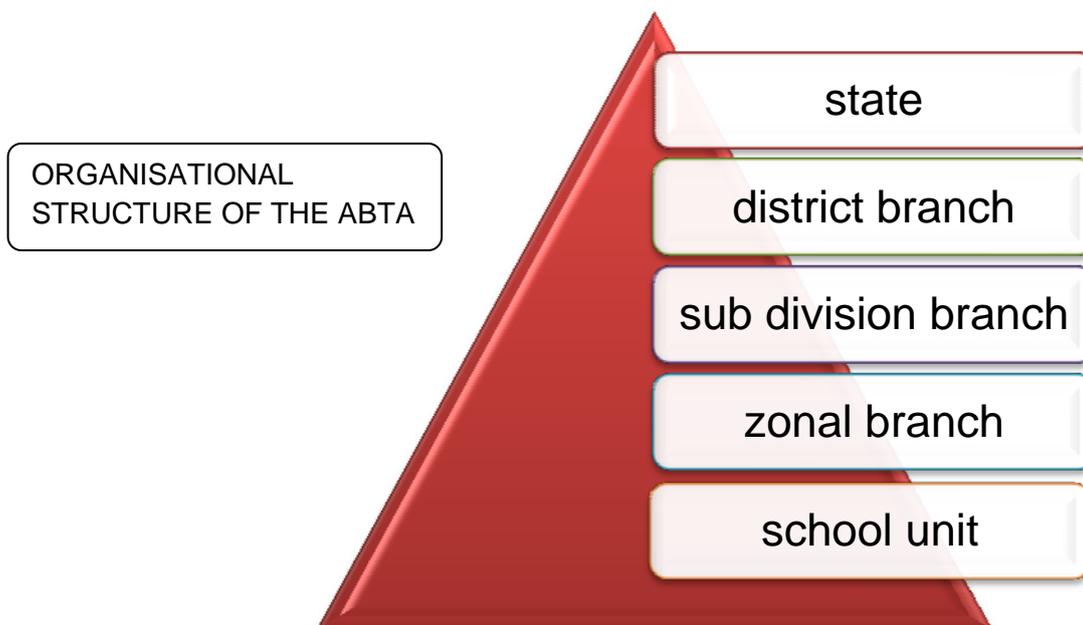


FIGURE 1: THE ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE ABTA

According to its Constitution, the association holds a Conference every three years to elect its top leadership. Elected delegates attend the same. The process for the election is: members of the zone attend the zonal conference to elect delegates (at least one per school) for the sub divisional conference. Those in attendance, then elect the delegates to be sent for the district conference who in turn elect a certain number of delegates each (subject to a minimum of ten members) to be sent to the State

Conference. This is where the Central Council, with at least one member from each subdivision is elected. This Council, elects from amongst themselves, the President, Vice Presidents(4), General Secretary and other office bearers who are responsible for all decisions taken by the association. Separate leadership exist at all the five levels.

All the other associations met, too have similar structures, with a tier or two of membership missing in some cases.

Role of the Associations

In West Bengal, associations have considerable influence. The Pratichi Trust, which conducts primary research in the field of education and healthcare in eastern India, has in the past stressed on the importance for involving teacher unions to keep a check on teacher absenteeism and to ensure that teachers pay “special attention to children from disadvantaged families” (Sen 2009:10). Formally, their role in education administration revolves around the following:

West Bengal Boards of Secondary and Primary Education

The two State boards, West Bengal Board of Primary Education (WBBPE) and West Bengal Board of Secondary Education (WBBSE), both have elected teacher representative members, though not as teacher organisation representatives.

The West Bengal Primary Education Act, 1973 provides for District Primary School Councils in the districts of West Bengal. Besides being responsible for maintaining a record of all teachers and non-teaching staff of the schools in the district, the Act also empowers these councils to prepare schemes for making free primary education available to all, as also to set up new schools and expand the existing ones for the

same purpose. These councils may appoint teachers and other staff to the schools in their district and transfer teachers from one school to another, within the district. In fact, they also have the power to grant or withdraw financial aid and recognition to primary schools within their jurisdiction. These all-powerful councils have teachers of primary schools as elected members, with each subdivision within the district, electing three teachers from amongst themselves. The Kolkata Primary School Council has provision for nine elected members from the teaching community of primary schools.

Further, these elected members of the Councils elect members of the Board from amongst themselves with each division of districts electing four. The Kolkata Primary School Council elects two members over and above the 12 members thus elected by the other districts. These members perform all functions of the board, as stipulated by the Act, including taking a decision on the syllabus that the affiliated schools follow, prescribing books for the same, conducting examinations, and generally being responsible for primary education in the State. In addition, they are also responsible for overseeing the working of the Primary School Councils, awarding financial aid to them and transferring teachers from one district to another. The Board also has specific committees, with elected teacher members, namely,

- **Curriculum Committee**- includes three elected primary teachers and one secondary school teacher. These teachers however need not be members of the Board and are responsible as part of the committee to advise the board on the syllabus that the schools affiliated to the Board follow.
- **Evaluation Committee**-similarly provides for three elected primary school teachers and one high school teacher among others, responsible for advising the board on specific academic issues, as directed by the Board to do.

- **Development Committee**-which allows for three out of the 12 teacher members of the board to be on the committee to advise the Board about the development of primary schools including on issues such as the school meal programme and parent- teacher interaction.

West Bengal Board of Secondary Education Act, 1963 stipulates that the WBBSE will have “thirty-two whole time and permanent teachers of recognised secondary schools (whose appointment has been approved in accordance with the rules), elected in the manner prescribed”. Apart from this, the State government nominates two heads of recognised institutions as well as five others who are interested in education. Besides the 34 members, who are teachers (or head of the institution) at secondary schools, there are 27 other members, including two teachers of teacher training colleges and a number of ex officio members. The State government appoints the President of the Board. Simply based on numbers therefore, teachers, together form an important part of the Board.

WBBSE is responsible for advising the State government on all matters related to secondary education, which also includes the power to conduct secondary examinations, to decide codes of conduct for teachers and non-teaching staff and among other things, to administer the Secondary Education Fund. WBBSE too has several committees, which carry out specific functions, and each has provision for Board members who are teachers. These are:

- **Executive Committee**- is responsible for advising the Board on all educational matters and implementing all the policies of the Board. It is also in charge of granting and withdrawing recognition to schools, recommending the syllabus and

course of study to that the schools under the Board, and all matters related to examinations. This it does, through the advice of the other specific committees. Five out of the 17 members of the committee may be teachers.

- **Recognition Committee**- responsible for advising the executive committee on all matters related to recognition of schools.
- **Syllabus Committee**-responsible for recommending the syllabus that the schools affiliated to the WBBSE, follow.
- **Appeals Committee**- is responsible for hearing all appeals pertaining to complaints of teachers and other employees against the Management Committees of their respective institutions. Three of the seven members of this committee may be teachers.
- **Finance Committee**- has the duty of preparing the budget and performing similar activities for the Board.

The Examinations Committee has no teacher-member.

Both the Boards award representation to *teachers*, in their personal capacities. Nonetheless, as most teachers are members of one association or the other, it is common practice for the associations to campaign for those candidates, belonging to their association. Utpal Ray, Swadesh Bhattachaj and Nabakumar Karmakar, General Secretaries of ABTA, WBPTA, and WBTA respectively, acknowledged this. This effectively translates into the associations having indirect control over the boards. A 2009 newspaper article in the Telegraph reports how a move to split the Madhyamik syllabus² by the WBBSE was put on hold because of opposition from the ABTA. The State government had sent a circular to the Board asking it to make way for the split.

² The Madhyamik (secondary) syllabus includes the curriculum of class IX and X (Dhar, 2005:20)

However, the report states, "the bifurcation issue was placed before the executive committee meeting but it could not be discussed in detail because a number of members felt that the government should consider the ABTA's stand,' said a committee member on Wednesday." (Telegraph 2009)

There have also been demands from the associations to make the West Bengal Council of Higher Secondary Education, an elected body, different from the current system of either members being nominated or ex officio (Mukherjee, 2003).

Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA)

RMSA is a plan by the Union government to ensure access for all to secondary and higher secondary education (MHRD, 2009). The project formally accords a role to teacher organisations by first envisaging a core group at the district level, responsible for implementation of RMSA. The plan allows this group to have representatives of teacher unions as members and start the process of micro planning. These district level groups will be responsible for preparing a district level Perspective as well as an Annual Plan. The state level implementation society for RMSA, will appraise the same with the help of recommendations by a Technical Support Group (TSG). The National Mission will in turn appraise the forwarded plans, paving the way for release of funds to the state level society. The management structure at the state level will constitute a State Mission, headed by the Chief Minister, and an Executive Committee lead by the Secretary-in-Charge of Secondary Education. The plan talks of "involvement" of teacher union representatives, besides others, to help bring about more transparency to activities of both.

At present, the union government has released funds to the State for preparatory activities for RMSA but the position with regard to teacher association involvement is still unclear.

National Foundation for Teachers' Welfare (NFTW)

NFTW founded in 1962 under the Charitable Endowments Act 1890 aims to provide relief to poor teachers. At the State level, a working committee, headed by the Minister in Charge of Primary and Secondary Education, manages the functioning of the Foundation (Department of School Education, Government of West Bengal 2007:119). According to Satynarayan Chandra, the office secretary of the NFTW, representatives of teacher organisations are members of the working committee and are thus involved in the working of the Foundation. Moreover, every year, the State awards meritorious teachers by inviting nominations from the registered teacher organisations. The Minister-in-Charge takes the final call on whom to award.

Influence of the Associations

So far, I have discussed the formal role that teachers and teacher organisations play, in the education administration in the State. However, the influence of the unions can be understood from the fact that teachers form an important part of the electorate, whose voting decision may be influenced in favour of a certain political party, by the leaders of the association (Pratichi Report 2002; Moe, 2005; Sharma, 2009 cited in Beteille 2009). Further, teachers themselves may be able to mobilize support for the candidates, by engaging in informal campaigns (Moe, 2005 cited in Beteille 2009). Utpal Ray, General Secretary of the ABTA, in fact, reaffirmed that this happens on the ground i.e. ABTA members campaign for election candidates from the CPM. Beteille (2009) thus argues

that this hold of the unions on policy makers protects them from disciplinary action that may otherwise be taken, against ineffectual teachers. This real or imagined collective power of teachers also ensures that their voice is an important one in the democratic space, so much so that politicians may especially introduce policies to appease the teaching community as a 2010 report in the Telegraph, described.³

The various teacher associations also pose demands for teachers' welfare from time to time that generally vary from salaries being given on time to the issue of teachers being barred from giving private tuitions, by the State government.

In West Bengal, a recent practice involves inviting teacher organisations, to discuss and debate, all educational issues of importance that arise. The Minister of School Education calls these meetings, through the Boards and an example of the same is a stakeholders' consultation on the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education 2009, held in March 2010. This is also an effective way to raise awareness about the programmes of the government.

In more constructive roles, the WBPTA and ABPTA have been working with the Pratichi Trust to gauge the success of the mid day meal programme in the State. As Kumar Rana (2007) writes, the ABPTA has also decided to oversee that enrolment; attendance and quality of teaching are up to the mark in 150 schools of Kolkata. The BPTA, which is opposed to the no- detention-rule in primary education in West Bengal, organises

³An article in the online edition of the newspaper dated 23 March 2010 talks about how the budget of the State was designed to appease the teaching community with promises of more recruitment and greater salaries. The article states, "The CPM has in the past banked on the support of party-backed teachers' lobbies such as the All Bengal Teachers' Association and the West Bengal College and University Teachers' Association to win elections. The move to create such a large number of posts is also being seen in the context of the forthcoming elections. 'The announcements will give a boost to the CPM-backed teachers' lobbies,' said a college principal. 'Especially so as CPM supporters hold an edge during any recruitment.' "

yearly exams for primary students, under the name of Primary Education Development Board. This Board awards certificates to those passing the exams and scholarships to the better performers. The certificate however, is not recognised anywhere.

Teachers Associations and the Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009

On 25 March 2010, the WBBPE conducted a stakeholders' consultation on the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009 at the office of the Board, Acharya Prafulla Chandra Bhawan, Salt Lake. In addition to the representatives of the recognised teacher organisations, the Secretaries and the Presidents of WBBPE, WBBSE, West Bengal Council of Higher Secondary Education, President of West Bengal Council of Rabindra Open Schooling, Director of School Education, and the Minister of School Education attended it. The teacher organisations gave in their reactions to the Act here, and some have sent in letters to the State and the Union governments, making their concerns known.

Response to Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009

All the associations see the inclusion of the right to education as a fundamental right (according to the 2002 amendment to the Constitution) as a step in the right direction. The Right to education (RTE Act 2009) is also, in most parts is seen as a positive development but at the same time, the associations agree that implementation is going to be an uphill task, especially because of the current situation in the State, seen in the backdrop of paucity of funds. The BPTA, is the only organisation that said it was opposed to the Act "in the main", as Kartick Saha, the General Secretary of the association felt that the failure of the various governments to provide education, e.g.

the National Policy on Education (1986) were not properly investigated. According to him, any fresh attempt to provide universal education needs to learn from the mistakes made in the past, if the programme is to succeed.

However, apart from that, there are certain provisions in the Act that all the associations are unanimous in pointing out as being in the need for change.

- **Education for All:** Sub clause one of Section three of the Act states that every child from the age of six to fourteen years shall have the right to free and compulsory education in a neighbourhood school until the completion of elementary education. While this is seen as a positive, what most associations are concerned about is the lack of mention of children below the age of six and those above the age of fourteen. For example, Soumen Bhattachaj, President of the *Sara Bangla Shikshak au Shiksha Karmi Samiti* believes that Section 11 in the Act, which allows free pre-primary education to be provided by the appropriate government is inadequate as it is not recognised as the right of the child. Similarly, Nabakumar Karmakar, General Secretary of WBTA too believes that since Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child includes those up to the age of 18 in the of the definition of the child, it only follows that those up to 18 years of age be given the right to free and compulsory education.
- **Admission in Age-appropriate Class:** According to section 4 of the Act, those above the age of six years and not admitted to a school would be able to seek admission to the *age* appropriate class. All the associations have a problem with this provision as they believe that it is impossible for a child who may not even know the alphabet, to cope up with the curriculum of say class eight (if his/ her

age allowed him entry to that class). While the same section goes on to talk about special training or bridged courses for these children, the teachers are of the opinion that the present infrastructure places constraints on such an idea. Moreover, there has been no discussion on the curriculum for these bridged courses or who is responsible for providing the same.

- **Reservation in Private Schools:** Sub section (c) of Section 12 provides for representation of disadvantaged children from the neighbourhood, to the tune of 25 percent of the total strength, in private unaided schools. The associations interviewed, see this as privatisation and commercialisation of education, which they deem to be undesirable. They believe that provision of education is the duty of the government, which it is simply passing on to the private players. Moreover, the Sara Bangla Associations believe that children from disadvantaged households may indeed find it difficult to adjust to the different atmosphere in these private schools.

On the other hand, the West Bengal Government School Teachers' Association sees this as a positive of the Act and accuses 'profit-making private schools' of opposing the same (Sarkar, 2010).

- **Admission throughout the Year:** Section 15 of the Act implies that a child may seek admission to the school at any time of the academic session. The associations describe this as absurd since it would be impossible to ensure that the child reach the same academic standard as the rest of the class in a space of few months.

However, the *Pouroshikshak au Karmi Sangh* does not have an objection to this, as this is already an accepted practice in the municipal schools, according to Ashok Chatterjee.

- **No-Detention- Policy:** Section 16 of the Act does not allow a child to be detained in any class until the completion of elementary education. This rule has existed in West Bengal for primary education in any case. But for it to be acceptable for children up to class eight, requires that teachers ensure that each child achieves a certain degree of educational achievement, and this may only be possible only through remedial classes, for which there is no provision in the Act. In the case that this provision leads to a pass certificate to be given to even those students who do not meet the minimum standards of the rest of the class, the associations are in opposition to this.
- **De-recognition to schools not meeting the norms:** Sections 18 and 19 of the Act state that all schools other than those run and controlled by the various governments will be required to secure a certificate of recognition from the specified authority who will grant the same, to only those schools that meet certain minimum standards, as prescribed in the schedule. They will also be allowed a time-period of three years to meet those standards, if they fail to meet them in the first instance. The associations point to this as a deficiency of the Act, because it will presumably lead to the closure of a number of schools. Further, the associations are concerned that in the event of the closure of the numerous aided schools, the teachers and the students from there, are likely to suffer.
- **School Management Committees:** Section 21 of the Act provides for the formation of School Management Committees with 75 percent of the membership comprising of parents and the rest of the members being in equal proportion from the local authority, teachers and local educationists. There seem to be several objections to this provision, not least among them, the issue

of feasibility of ensuring parents' attendance in the meetings and their dedication to the work of the committee. According to Sudip Goswami, General Secretary of the Sara Bangla Primary Teachers' Association, this is especially notable in light of the fact that they may belong to the lower strata of society and may in fact have considerable difficulty in even ensuring that their children have enough to eat or go to a school in the first place. Ashok Maiti, General Secretary of the Headmasters' Association also showed concern about the literacy levels of parents and therefore their ability to ensure adequate checks on teachers. Apart from this, Goswami and Bhattachaj also talk of representation to members of the local authority, which had had the ability to lead to political interference in the working of the school and a situation of teachers being subjected to undue pressure.

WBTA also believes that while democratic structures such as the SMCs were important and desirable to ensure the smooth running of the school, but it was important at the same time to ensure that teachers had equal representation in the committee as parents, in the view of the role played by the teachers in running the schools.

Utpal Ray also wondered why the same was not applicable to private schools while Kartick Saha termed it an "eye wash" as according to him, the SMCs have no real power in the first place.

- **Ban on private tuitions:** According to Section 28 of the Act, no teacher may provide private tuitions to children. This rule too has been in effect in West Bengal since 2001 when the State government asked the teachers in government run and aided schools to give in declarations to abide by the same and all the associations are ostensibly in support of this. The General Secretary

of the Headmasters' Association however admitted that the practice of private tuitions are prevalent only because schoolteachers fail to complete the syllabus on time, and thus students, especially those without help at home, require additional support. Kartick Saha, the General Secretary of the BPTA echoed this view. The General Secretary of the ABTA, Utpal Ray, talked of the importance of a change in the parents' mindset for private tuitions to end.

- **Minimum working hours:** The schedule stipulates minimum working hours of 45 hours a week- this is where the associations differ. While *the Pouroshikshak au Karmi Sangh* is supportive, the Headmasters' Association says that the Act does not define the working hours, that is, it is not known if something like commuting time is included in the working hours. Neither does the Act spell out whether school hours are to increase accordingly. On the other hand, WBTA believes that teachers are being treated as factory workers and that working hours should not exceed thirty in a week even though there may be preparatory hours, over and above this. The BPTA echoes this view.
- **Need for a headmaster:** Another provision in the schedule states that a school may have a headmaster only if the number of students exceeds 150. The associations criticise this as unreasonable. This is because, if the number of students is less than 150 then the senior most teacher is meant to officiate as the headmaster, but this without the same scale of salary as a regular headmaster. Goswami and Maiti, both reiterated this. The associations are of the opinion that such a scenario would mean that teachers might be unwilling to shoulder the additional responsibility and thus deprive the school of the necessary direction, required for smooth functioning.

- **Excessive Centralisation:** Associations feel that the Act provides for more centralisation than is desired. The WBGSTA opines that a centralised approach to setting the curriculum and homogenous rules and norms, across states may not work in varied cultures and levels of education indicators.
- **Self-contradictory provisions:** The ABPTA as well as the WBGSTA also point out some provisions as being self-contradictory. For example, they do not see why a transfer certificate should be awarded and disciplinary action taken if it is not (Section 5), when it is not necessary for admission to a school. Similarly, the associations deem Section 14 that says that the birth certificate is to serve as proof of age, and then goes on to say that, the school cannot deny admission to a child in its absence, as inconsistent.

Recommendations

Since the teacher associations are influential, not just in terms of representing the views of teachers, who are important stakeholders in the Act, but also as major players in the education administration in the State, it follows that their objections to the Act, be at least heard and addressed.

This may be possible through greater discussions and consultations, beyond the one that was held in March 2010. This can also help to actually raise more awareness about the Act, and some of its provisions. For example, the apprehension among teachers that the no-detention-policy will lead to the lowering of academic standards may be addressed by making them acquainted with the merits of comprehensive and continuous evaluation (as envisaged by the Act). Setting out guidelines to implement the same may also be useful.

Some issues like ambiguity about school hours, and special training may be addressed through the formulation of state specific rules, which are already in place for some states.

But the most crucial aspect of the associations are the numbers they command, and this should be put to good use. The associations should in fact, be encouraged to spread more awareness about the Act amongst its teacher members, who can further ensure that more parents and students are aware

Awareness about RTE 2009

During the course of the study, I met the now ex- Member in Mayor Council (education). When asked about the RTE Act, she said she was not aware about the provisions, as she was no longer in office, the elections to the KMC having been over recently. The elections took place towards the end of May 2010. The Act came into effect on 1 April 2010.

about their rights, and exercise the same. Greater awareness may indeed be the key to the success of the Act.

Conclusion

The paper aimed to study the important teacher associations in West Bengal, their role in the education administration of the State and their response to the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009.

Accordingly, I found that there were 16 registered organisations in the State, apart from the associations of the KMC schoolteachers. The associations interviewed have a democratic structure of decision-making and according to the office bearers of the associations themselves, no political backing. Nonetheless, they have a certain amount of influence in the State, through direct or indirect means. While the ABTA is one party that admittedly campaigns and helps spread awareness about election candidates from

the CPI (M), the others depend on their numbers and agitations to have their demands met. Representation given to teachers in the WBBSE and the DPSCs also translates into representation for teacher organisation members as the latter campaign for candidates standing for elections to these institutions. This influence and the wide support base that at least some of the organisations enjoy could be used for more positive campaigns, as it is happening with the mid day meal programme, albeit on a small scale. The involvement of teacher organisations envisaged for the RMSA also probably stems from that belief.

With regard to the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009, the teachers raise varied criticisms from the Act not including all children in its purview, to being infeasible to implement due to age-appropriate admission, admission throughout the year and de-recognition to schools not meeting the norms, which would lead to the closure of many such institutions. Moreover, the associations accuse the government of opening education to privatisation by making private unaided schools reserve seats to the tune of 25 percent of total strength. They also have several objections to the School Management Committees and point to various provisions for being self-contradictory. The working hours of teachers being increased also meets criticism.

While some of their objections may be valid, others may simply be addressed by making state specific rules, or making teachers more aware about the provisions in the Act. It is also essential to encourage these associations to spread awareness about the Act, in its ranks, as well as to teachers and students. This may prove to be crucial for the Act's success.

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