

**Full Length Research Paper****Universalisation of Elementary Education: The Present Status of the District of Cooch Behar, West Bengal****Prasenjit Deb***Registrar, University of Kalyani, Kalyani, West Bengal India***Abstract**

*The catalytic role of education in encouraging the human resource development comprising better awareness, health, nutrition, improved socio-economic condition, congenial natural environment and sound ecological balance has, in fact, attracted the attention of every civilized nation cutting across space and time. In order to erect the basic foundation of overall human resource development, India has adopted a number of public policies on education. Universalisation of Elementary Education (UEE) has been a principal milestone to this direction. The principal thrust of this paper has been two folds: i) to understand the basic policy frame work of Universalisation of Elementary Education, and ii) to understand the operational perspective of the policy by way of analyzing the status of elementary education in the district of Cooch Behar of the state of West Bengal.*

**Keywords:** *UEE, Retention, Provision, Operation Blackboard, Cohort, DPSE, etc.*

**Introduction**

The Indian state is really poised to make a real breakthrough in achieving its avowed objectives of 'Education for All'. Indeed, Universalisation of Elementary Education has been one of the primary goals of educational development in India ever since independence. Not only the public policies but also the constitutional prescriptions suggest that the state should provide free and compulsory education to all children upto the age of 14 years. Accordingly the National Policy on Education (NPE), 1986, has reaffirmed the programme of UEE. Universalisation of Elementary Education in India means making education available to all children in the age group of 6-14 years. It implies that education is for all and not restricted for few. Irrespective of caste, culture, creed, status, economic condition, education, be it formal or non formal, should be provided to all Indian children. It means also free education. Universalisation of Primary or Elementary Education covers three important areas: a) Universalisation of Provision, b) Universalisation of Enrolment, and c) Universalisation of Retention. Firstly, it means that school facilities should be provided to all the children between the age group of 6-14 years in the country. Secondly, all children of the said age group must be enrolled. Thirdly, once a child joins a primary school, he/she cannot leave the school until he/she attains a sustainable level. The underlying implication of Universalisation of Elementary Education lies in the fact that primary education plays an important role in laying the proper foundation of child's cultural, emotional, intellectual, moral, physical, social, and spiritual development. Indeed, countries having adequate arrangement for primary education are much more advanced than those of inadequate provision. The importance of the study is having multifaceted objectives viz. a) to study on the present status on enrolments and identify the constraints, prospect and factors towards universal enrolment with emphasis on the aspects like gender-difference, spatial difference and community difference, b) to study thorough identification and application on the effect and proficiency of different media and media-mix towards education in entirety, c) to develop necessary tools, rating scales value-judgement system to access in terms of knowledge, competencies, perception, perspective and professional growth, d) to establish relationship in between teachers' performance and children's retention, e) to study meteorological and geographical parameters responsible for influencing and steering school-going, in-school behavior and community responses, f) to study health, nutrition and other aspects of children, and g) to study management system related to primary education on line with its development structure and human interaction, financial resourcing.

**Discussion**

Owing to the lack of any universally standardized definition of primary/elementary education, one cannot have an accepted formula in defining primary education. Primary education may be viewed as a basic stage of education which is either a self-contained phase (of various lengths in various countries) or which forms a part of longer cycle of general education. In other words, primary education designates the range of schooling for children from about 6-12, 13 or 14 years of age.

In India, the different study reports and conferences as well as commissions have suggested for variegated age groups and classes to determine primary education. The Education Commission, 1964-1966 used the term 'Primary' as detailed below:

- a) *Lower primary : Classes I to IV or I to V*
- b) *Upper primary : Classes V to VII or VI to VIII*

A publication of the NCERT entitled National Curriculum of Elementary and Secondary Education: A Frame work (1988) has used the term elementary education (8 years) divided into primary stage (5 years) and upper primary stage (3 years). In general term, the primary stage of education covers plus I to IV covering children of age group between 6-9 years. Despite the policy prescription for the Universalisation of Elementary Education, the experiences have been bleak and unsatisfactory. The reasons are many. There has been no uniformity and consensus on the policies taken by the State Government for realization of the national programme like UEE. Both at the national and state level, the total amount spent on primary education have been less than 30% of the total allocated budget for education. The operational bottle-necks for the implementation of UEE programme has not been well conceived and in most cases remained unattempted. As a result, the targets for universalisation of provision, enrolment and retention of the children at the schools have been left far short of reality. In consequence, the progress of elementary/ primary education as an index of general, social and economic development of the country has remained a distant cry.

In order to provide momentum to this important national issue, the National Government has reemphasized on universalisation of elementary education by giving a new call what is called 'Education for All'. Operation Blackboard (OB) has been another innovation to realize the universalisation of elementary education. Some of the State Government has passed legislation on compulsory education for the children under 14 years. These are, in fact, in tune with the constitutional provision laid down in Chapter IV of the Indian Constitution. Moreover, the national policy makers have reached a consensus on the issue of inserting the provision of 'Right to Education' in Part III i.e. in the Fundamental Rights Chapter of the Constitution. It is regrettable that India is yet to achieve a considerable position in terms of the growth of literacy. However, the 2011 Census reveals the literacy rate of over 74.04%. This has encouraged our policy planners to achieve the border goal of "Education for All" by 2017 AD. This programme has received international recognition at the world conference on 'Education for All' held at 'Jontiem' in March, 1990.

One of the principal thrust areas of the 8th Plan (92-97) is to bring about vitality and momentum to the Universal Primary Education Programme (UPEP), with definite objective to increase retention, improvement of quality, specification of minimum levels of learning and their attainment by the learners. It is for the first time, the 8<sup>th</sup> Plan suggests that the District will be treated as a unit of educational planning and programme implementation. More specially, the backward districts were given priority for getting assistance for the realization of District Primary Education Programme (DPEP). Under this programme, district specific educational plans were developed through a participatory process. As a follow up of the centrally sponsored scheme of UEE, DPEP had widely undertaken during 1997-2002. The principal thrusts of the programme are: i) Universal enrolment and universal retention, ii) Substantial improvement of the quality of education, and iii) Creation of creative teaching-learning environment. At the end of 9<sup>th</sup> Plan (1997-2002), Sarva Shiksha Avijaan (SSA) has been launched for classes' I-VIII with broader objectives and still it continues.

In West Bengal, efforts in the direction of UEE had received momentum especially after launching DPEP and SSA. The level of success in universalisation elementary education has already crossed the national average. Despite success, the picture of elementary education cannot be said all proved. There have been district level variations and in most of the cases, the success is urban-centric. However, the West Bengal model of the decentralized development has been a path breaker to this direction. Such a policy of elementary educational development charged with strong political will seeks to achieve the objective of "Education for All".

Cooch Behar, one of the twenty districts in West Bengal, was a princely state prior to its accession to India in 1950. Unlike other districts, it had autonomous status during the British Raj. In view of its distinctive cultural heritage and administrative system inherited from Maharaja's legacy, the district presents a case of 'suigeneris'. The state of Cooch Behar before merger built a political culture and administrative structure for the perpetuity of the Maharaja's rule. Like in any other third world feudal states' ruler-subject relationship was marked by 'My Baap' culture. In fact, highly centralized administrative structure was prevalent under the aegis of the Maharaja. Goal oriented development administration was completely a distant cry. The system of administration underwent some changes with the coming of the western-educated, liberal minded Maharaja Nripendra Narayan. The present district of Cooch Behar has been the outcome of the merger of the princely state of Cooch Behar with the Government of India. The present district was born on 1<sup>st</sup> January, 1950 by special administrative order of the Central Cabinet.

According to Census Data (2011), the Total Population of the district is 28, 22,780 out of which there are 14, 53,590 males (51.49%) & 13, 69,190 females (48.51%). Another salient feature of the district is that scheduled caste population outnumbers the general caste population and its percentage to total population is represented by Scheduled Caste (50.1%) and Scheduled Tribe (0.58%) respectively. In the district, Hindu population (76.44%) exceeds far more than Muslim population (23.34%). Cooch Behar which is the administrative headquarter of the district of Cooch Behar consists of 5 sub-divisions, 8 police stations, 12 blocks, each of which has a Panchayat Samity and 128 Gram Panchayats. The district has 6 towns including Cooch Behar having municipal status.

Despite certain piecemeal attempts of the Maharajas of Cooch Behar to establish a few schools and colleges, there had been no concerned effort on the part of the Maharaja to universalize the education in this tiny state. The reason is obvious. Even after independence and after the merger of Cooch Behar State with West Bengal, no definite planning did operate actively for the development of the primary education. With regard to the status of literacy, in Cooch Behar district it is 75.49% below the state

average 77.08%. It is also noticeable that within the same district while urban literacy level is at 89.01% which is little more than higher than the state average (85.54%), the same for the rural area is barely 73.87% a little more less than the state average (72.97) and it is to a substantial extent i.e. 12% lower than the urban one. Again within the same populace, the difference between male (81.52%) and female literacy (69.08%) has been to the tune of 12.44%. Thus the literacy rate of women has been still marginal.

The total number of Govt. Aided primary schools is 2,519 apart from 422 private and 96 unrecognized Schools of which 10.90 per cent schools are having one room, and 2.56 per cent with single teacher schools. 94.3 per cent Schools are running with girls' toilets and 92 per cent with boys' toilet. At present, 58.3 per cent schools are having playground facility and 51.1 per cent having ramp facility. While only 14.6 per cent schools have electricity facility, and poor percentage of 1.5 having computer connectivity. One positive observation is that 99.6 per cent schools are running with drinking water facility and 100 per cent schools with kitchen-shed out of which 99.9 per cent schools provide mid day meal facility. At present the district is having 8,542 teachers for 2,519 primary schools. Even, 2318 and 378 teachers have been engaging in 422 private and 96 unrecognized Schools. The school teacher ratio is roughly 3:10. In 2011-12, the enrolment in Government Aided Primary Schools is 278,327 apart from 43,373 and 8,337 for private and unrecognized schools. In 2011-12, the requirement of teacher on existing enrolment on the basis of standard student teacher ratio (40:1) was, 6958 while the existing teachers' number was 8,542 which is 123 per cent of the total number of requirement. From the data, it is observed that the district is in a position to provide facilities by way of universalizing the provisions meant for thorough development of primary education in the district.

The status of the district in terms of enrolment of students in the primary schools may not be out of place to mention here. During 2011-12, out of 3, 87,787 children in the age group (5-9) years 3, 38,732 were enrolled in all types of schools. Thus while during 2011-12, the enrolment was 87.35% of the total population of age group 5-9 years.

The status of drop-out from the primary schools has been very much high in the district. The class wise level of drop-out at percentage in different span of years may be presented in the following table:

CLASSWISE LEVEL OF DROPOUT IN DIFFERENT SPAN OF YEARS					
Span	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV	Rate of Drop-out (%)
2008-09	91,290	71,095	65,715	64,085	-
2009-10	112,784	85,971	80,238	77,070	5.83 (I-II)
2010-11	105,611	81,818	76,756	74,656	15.92 (I-III)
2011-12	103,601	75,814	73,905	72,847	20.20 (I-IV)

From the table, the following observations may be made:

- The Rate of dropout is 5.83 per cent during the year 2008-09 and 2009-10 for class I to class II.
- The Rate of dropout is 15.92 per cent during the year 2008-09 and 2010-11 for class I to class III.
- Total dropout from class I to class IV is 20.20 per cent during the span of period 2008-09 to 2011-12.
- The decline of dropout level has been a common occurrence.

## Conclusion

The District Sarva Shiksha Mission and District Primary School Council have been vested with the responsibility to monitor and implement the universalisation of elementary education programme. The office of the District Inspector of Schools (Primary & Secondary) is also providing the administrative and monitoring support of the primary schools of the district. The Zilla Parishad and the Panchayat Samity as well as the Gram Panchayat do have their control over the primary schools of the respective levels. The Municipalities have also been brought to monitor and develop the primary education programme of the district.

With such a backdrop, it would be no exaggerated to comment that the rural women, backward and weaker communities and the mass, in general with their incredible agricultural background should be the thrust areas for universalizing of primary education in the district under study. Universalisation of Primary Education has been a nationwide movement which entails a strong political will and participation of the people at the grass root levels. The Panchayat, the different National and State Government Organizations engaged in development function, the educational institutions and voluntary agencies should be brought to fabricate their views and actions for the overall development of status of primary education of this backward district. Sarva Shiksha Avijaan with definite objectives should have been the 'Sine-Quonon' for the realization of Universalisation of Elementary Education. It is worth noting that the District of Cooch Behar has been brought SSA. One should hope that if such programme is properly implemented, the mission for Universalisation of Elementary Education would effectively be realized.

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