



## Review Paper

# Status of Primary Rural Education: An Overview of Bankura and Birbhum Districts, West Bengal, India

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Available online at: [www.isca.in](http://www.isca.in), [www.isca.me](http://www.isca.me)

Received 17<sup>th</sup> October 2014, revised 25<sup>th</sup> December 2014, accepted 31<sup>st</sup> January 2015

## Abstract

West Bengal having an agricultural-based rural economy face myriad of livelihood issues and infrastructural deficiencies. A well-designed educational infrastructure can assure greater access to knowledge, which in turn will make people capable and help in holistic development. But of West Bengal's progress in achieving priority educational objectives has not been encouraging, particularly in the rural sector. Bankura and Birbhum districts are no exceptions, which lag far behind in literacy rate than the state average. Especially the state-run subsidized institutions in the rural areas which are scarce and mostly in deplorable condition are still the most important source of knowledge centres for the marginalized rural people. Schemes involving Mid-day Meal, Adult Literacy Programme, Sarba Siksha Abhijan etc have influenced the situation positively to certain extent.

**Keywords:** literacy-rate, enrolment rate, performance indicators, rural-urban differentials, Mid-day Meal, adult literacy Programme, Sarba Siksha Abhijan, infrastructural gaps.

## Introduction

India lives in its villages- the statement by Mahatma Gandhi is still relevant from the socio-economic perspectives. Quality of life enjoyed by rural people has to be improved by implementing strategies focusing on poverty alleviation, better livelihood opportunities, provision of basic amenities and infrastructure facilities through various programmes. West Bengal having an agricultural-based rural economy face myriad of livelihood issues and infrastructural deficiencies. The concept of human development recognizes expansion of people's choices and freedom in all aspect as the main premise of development. Only, well-designed educational infrastructure can assure greater access to knowledge, which in turn will make people capable. Progress of West Bengal in achieving priority educational objectives has not been encouraging, particularly in the rural sector. The state has elaborate infrastructure both private and public but it is not sufficient to cater the problems of the marginalized rural people, for who to realise their goal of achieving primary education is still difficult<sup>1</sup>. The state run subsidized institutions are still the most important source of knowledge centers for the villagers. The right to education for children is now constitutionally a fundamental right; but merely it is followed in reality<sup>2</sup>.

Amartya Sen elaborated human development perspective and opined that the contrast between what great things human beings can achieve and what limited lives most women and men end up living is truly remarkable. The case is no different in West Bengal; there is a unique coexistence of high number of illiterate people and learned intellectuals passing out from several seats of higher learning.

Out of the nineteen districts of the state, the two districts of the western fringe, Bankura and Birbhum, which are lagging behind in terms of educational attainments and human development index have been selected for case-study. The focus has been on the universalizing of education. Attempt has been made to analyse that how far the light of the basic knowledge has penetrated in the rural societies of these two districts.



Figure-1  
Study Area: Districts of West Bengal

Bankura, the fourth largest district of West Bengal is popularly known as *Rarh*. It has an area of 6882 sq.km and according to the Census of 2011, it has a population of 3,596,292 (ranking 13<sup>th</sup> in terms of total population). It is bounded by Paschim Medinipur and Hooghly district in the east, Purulia district in the west and Bardhaman in the north and east. The backward areas are mostly located in western and southern part of the district, falling in the hilly, lateritic zone.

**Table-1**  
**Administrative Divisions of Bankura**

<i>Bankura</i>	
Sub division	3 (Bankura Sadar, Bishnupur, Khatra)
Block	22
Municipality	3
Gram-Panchayat	190

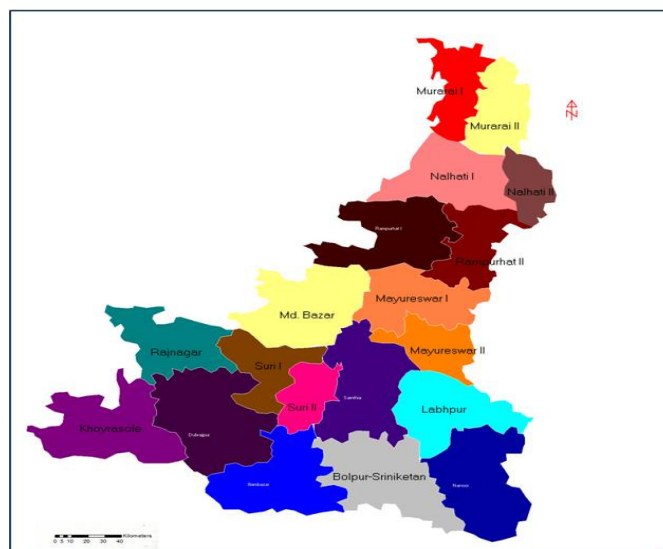


**Figure-2**  
**Bankura District**

Birbhum with a total population of 3,502,387 shares 5.12 percent of the areal extent of the state but 3.76 percent of the total population. It has a relatively low population density i.e. 771 per sq. km in 2011 Chhotanagpur plateau in the western fringe of the district is the reason behind the undulating topography of it which is lateritic in nature. The alluvial eastern part is comparatively more fertile.

**Table-2**  
**Administrative Divisions of Birbhum**

<i>Birbhum</i>	
Sub division	3 (Birbhum Sadar, Rampurhat, Bolpur)
Block	19
Municipality	6
Gram-Panchayat	167



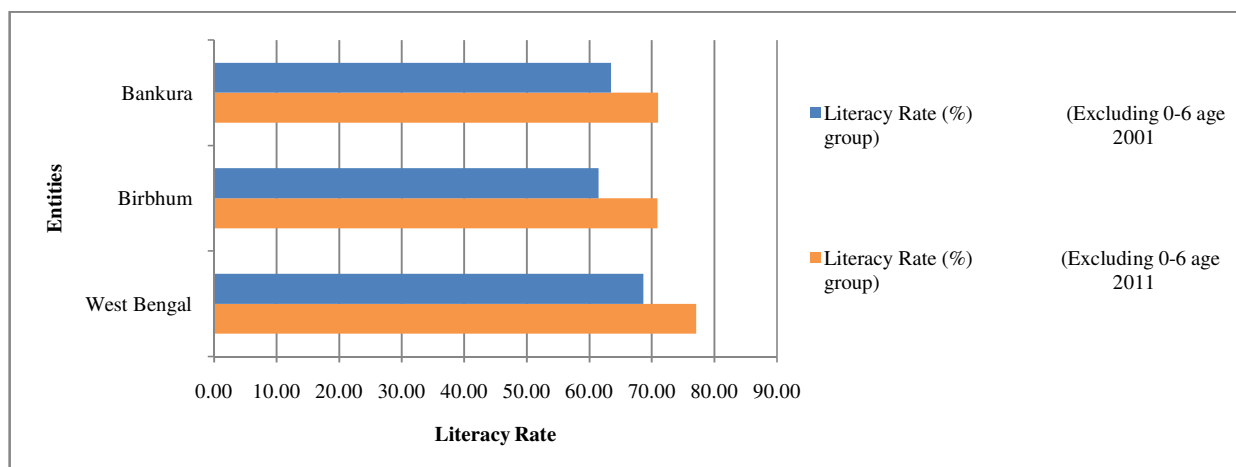
**Figure-3**  
**Birbhum District**

## Methodology

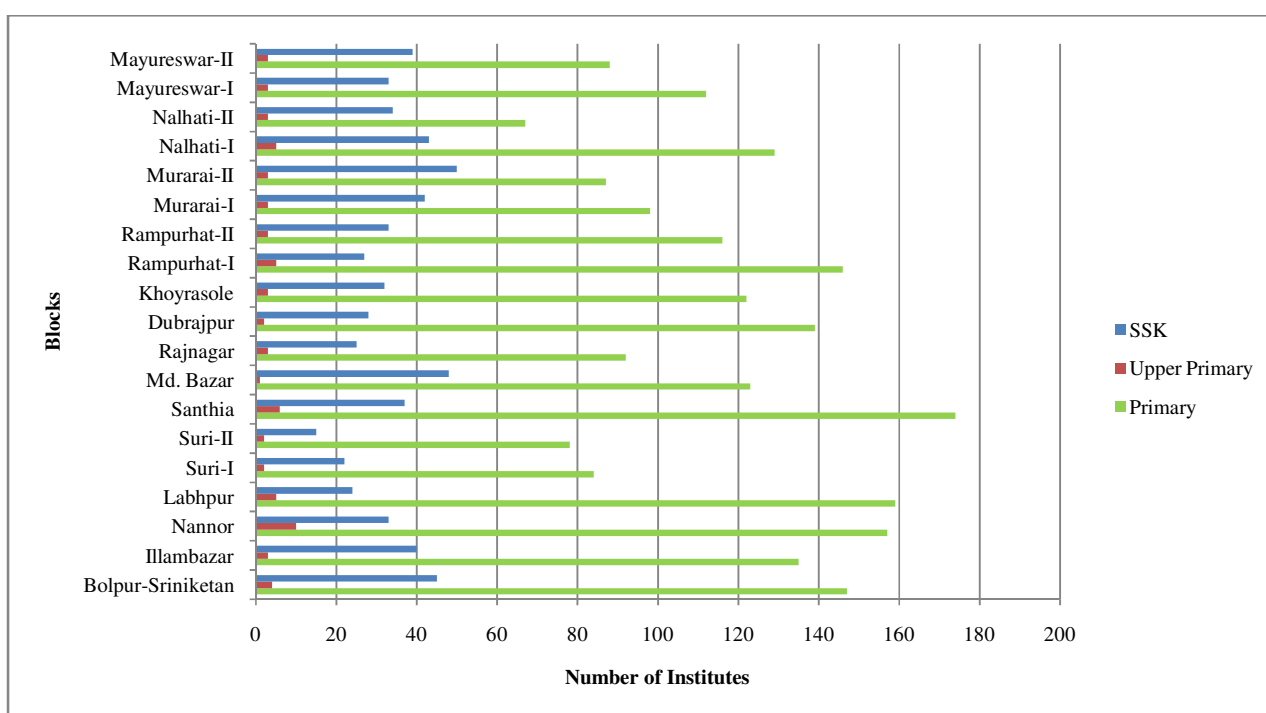
For the study secondary data has been collected mainly from District Census Abstract, District Gazetteers and District Human Development Reports. Besides, random primary surveys have been also conducted to access the ground reality; involving the local residents, students and the related officials. These has been utilised to have a meaningful overview of the situation of primary educational attainments in the said two districts of West Bengal.

**Progress in Spreading Literacy:** To achieve greater total literacy in a short span of time the general policy approach emphasizes on programmes like adult literacy for initiating and continuing education on the one hand and universalizing of education through primary school enrolment by improving school facilities. The current level of illiteracy can be mainly due to non-enrolment and high dropouts. For West Bengal in general the main worrying factor is that universal enrolment at the primary level has not been achieved. It indicates that total literacy in the near future will be unattainable unless a whole-hearted effort is made<sup>3</sup>. Though out of the 19 districts (Census, 2011) Bankura and Birbhum rank 13 and 14 in terms of literacy rate<sup>3</sup>.

Birbhum has had only moderate success in spreading primary education among people which is in sync with the general trend of the state. Although, significant steps have been made in recently towards universalizing of elementary education, the results are not much formidable. Birbhum was one of the first five districts of West Bengal to be covered by the first phase of District Primary Education Programme, for which the number of primary schools and SSK i.e. *Sishu-siksha Kendras* have improved but the presence of upper primary institutes are still low, which hinders further progress of the students.



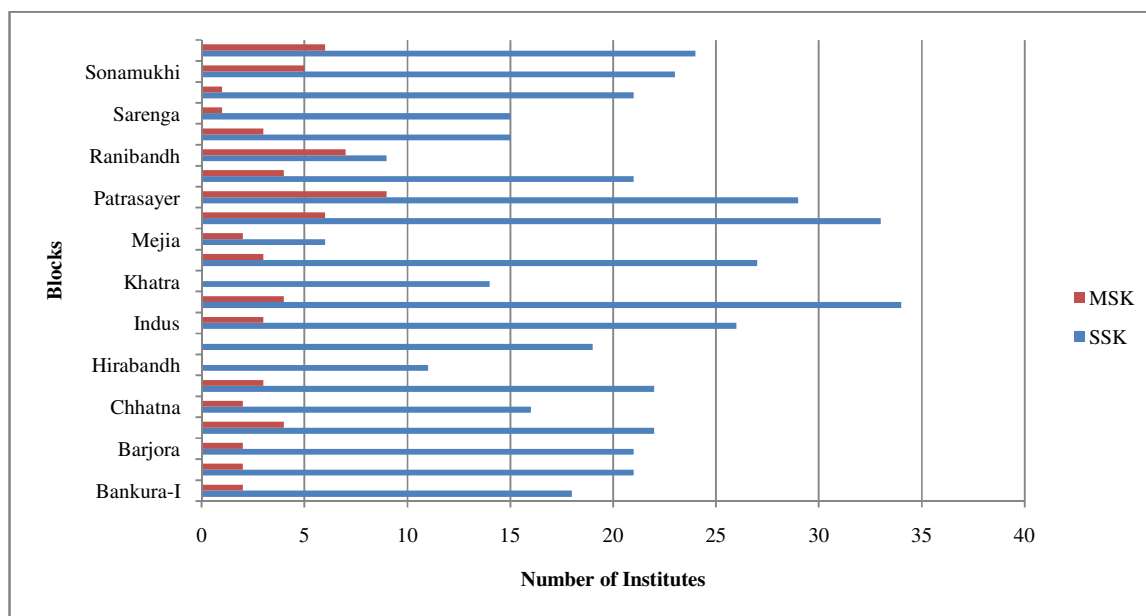
**Figure-4**  
**Comparative Literacy Rate (2011)**



**Figure-5**  
**School Composition of Birbhum District (2012)**

The overall literacy rate in rural Birbhum has improved, hovering around 70.90 percent during the last Census; but the inter-block disparities have not been bridged. It is heartening to note that the female literacy rates increased more reducing the male-female gap in the literacy, though the disparity is still there among the disadvantaged groups. This can be attributed to the growth of the MSK i.e. *Mahila Shiksha Kendras*. Following parameters need to be examined with respect to the enrolment scenario in this district: lack of access to school for a large section of children, infrastructural limitations, low of completion of primary education due to drop-out and repetition, migration related issues etc.

One of the main reasons due to which Bankura suffers from poor access to social services is due to low population density. Besides, there are natural barriers and small habitations in forest areas. The current overall literacy rate of the district is 70.95 percent. Srenga, Ktolpur, Joypur, Bankura I and II have performed well, but the level in blocks like Patrasayer, Sonamukhi, Saltora, Bishnupur is dismal. 64 backward mouza in this district have been identified where there is no primary school or *Sishu Siksha Kendra* (SSK) within 1km.



**Figure-6**  
**School Composition of Bankura District**

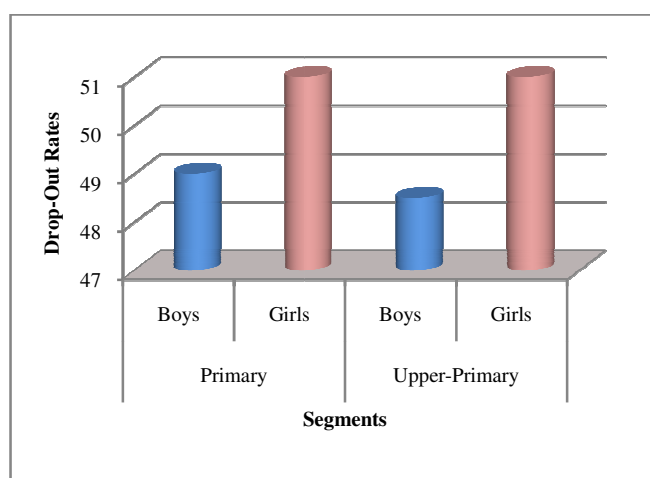
**Table-3**  
**Inaccessibility of Primary Schools in Bankura (2012)**

Name of Block (having distance to the nearest primary school $\geq 4$ )	Gram Panchayat	Name of Mouza	Distance (km)
Ranibandh	Barikul	Lepam	6
Sonamukhi	Dhansimla	Amghata	5
Sonamukhi	Dhansimla	Indkata	5
Indpur	Hatagram	Dakshin Kendbana	4
Bishnupur	Ajodhya	Bansh kopa	4
Bishnupur	Dwarika Gosainpur	Kelemele	4
Simlapal	Machatora	Memouli	4
Simlapal	Machatora	Suknabad	4

**Gender Disparity:** Education enhances the capacity of an individual to participate in the process of development.

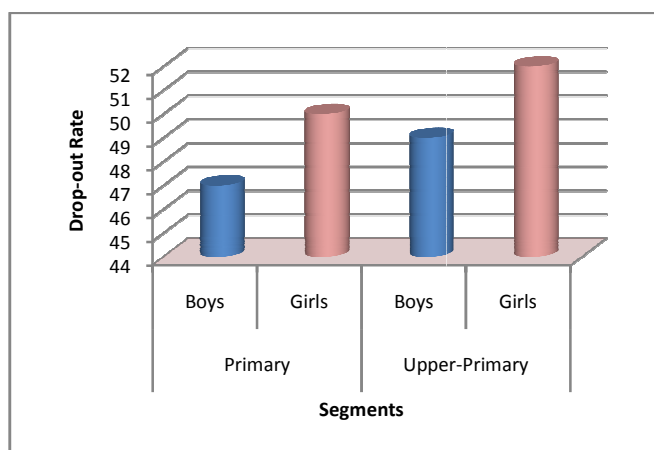
Bankura scores low on the female literacy side resulting into a huge gender gap. There are in fact, 688 mouzas having female literacy rate less than 30 percent. Incidentally, these are the blocks, which score low on standard of living. It is worst in the case of Hirabandh, followed by Chhatna. The livelihood issues are so acute in these areas that there is a need to link up literacy with the issue of livelihood to make the impact more effective and sustainable<sup>4</sup>.

In eleven blocks- Bishnupur, Chhatna, Gangajalghati, Hirabandh, Indpur, Mejhia, Onda, Patrasayer, Saltora, Sonamukhi and Ranibandh where the gender gap in literacy rate is much higher in comparison to the national average a scheme called National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary level (NPEGEL) has been taken up to promote education of girl child and minimize the gender gap.



**Figure-7**  
**Gender-wise Drop-out Rates, Bankura (2012)**

The substantial male and female literacy gap is understandably more in the rural areas of Birbhum district. Blocks like Saltora, Hirabandh, Mejia have perceptibly low female literacy rate, the residents there are more interested in training the girl-child in house-hold chores which is a requisite for marriage and since they do not expect or get opportunity to get employed they do not feel necessary to pursue education. There is a common saying that, if you educate a man, you educate a person; but if you educate a woman you educate a family. So, in order to improve the level of education in rural Birbhum emphasis has to be given specially on reducing the gender-gap.



**Figure-8**  
**Gender-wise Drop-out Rates, Birbhum (2012)**

**Rural-Urban Differentials:** Comparing the literacy rates of urban and rural areas of the Birbhum district with that of the state reveals a remarkable gap that indicates the district's lower level of urbanization. Though efforts have been taken to narrow down the rural-urban differential, the process of bridging the gap has been slow. Apart from the difference in literacy level, in urban Birbhum the ratio of primary to secondary schools is 2.7 while it is 6.3 in rural Birbhum. Likewise, the percentage of schools with two or fewer teachers is 16.7 in case of urban pockets but 36.2 in rural zones. While in urban areas of Birbhum almost 50 percent the teachers are women, the number is only 15 percent in the rural areas.

In Bankura the general standard of living in the villages is a concern, many often face problems in arranging daily square-meals, so for them spending money on education is a luxury. Long distance to school, poor road conditions, and inadequate nutrition leading to health-issues hinder the villagers from taking up schooling. Reduction of the cost of sending children to schools by providing incentives like freed textbooks, uniform etc have found to be effective in some villages of the backward blocks. Moreover, the demand for education can be enhanced through active community and parents' participation, for this Village Education Committee has to be set up for spreading awareness and motivating the villagers.

**Position of the Disadvantaged Groups:** In general it is widely perceived by members of socially and economically disadvantaged groups that education is the only way out for upward mobility for their children. Still the disparity in levels of educational achievement between these so-called have and have-nots has not decreased as fast as it should have. In the rural areas of Birbhum, there the literacy rate among the Muslims is quite low. The female literacy rate is very low in case of the schedule tribe and schedule caste groups residing in rural areas hovering around 20 percent and 33 percent respectively.

In case of Bankura, the percentage of B.P.L families is highest in blocks- Chhatna, Taldangra, Raipur, Ranibandh, Hirbandh and Saltora interestingly these are the blocks which have high percentage of S.T. population and the literacy level is also dismal.

If people are not able to meet their basic need of 'food, cloth and shelter' it is obvious that education for them will remain as a 'luxury'. To get people interested and involved with education, available schemes have to be taken up effectively to meet the other basic necessities of life.

**Issue of Drop-outs:** In case of Bankura, the dropout rate in primary school is around 8 percent that in the upper primary is 19 percent, which is definitely a source of worry. Percentage of out of school children is remarkable in blocks like- Bankura -I, Gangajalghati, Mejhia, Patrasayer, Saltora. Migration is another big issue in the district. There is a seasonal migration of 1-6 months in search of livelihood and normally the young children accompany their parents and miss out the vital primary education. The problem of drop-out and repetition is linked closely with the quality of education. Teacher-student ratio is definitely an important factor in imparting quality education. Often it is seen that the part-time or contractual teachers are more dedicated than the regular ones and the main reason behind it is that they are local recruits and are familiar with the problems of that area<sup>5</sup>.

Apart from primary enrolment, another worrying factor is the high dropout rate. A cohort study conducted in the Birbhum district revealed that about 15% students dropped out during four years from Class I to IV, and the rate goes on increasing at the higher classes. Though no clear pattern can be observed on the correlation between various indicators of school infrastructure and percentage of out of school children, it is observed that better infrastructure attracts more students. Bolpur-Sriniketan- the frontrunner in school infrastructure does not show the minimum percentage of drop-out rate, perhaps for the reason that schooling outcome is the result of the interaction of both supply and demand side factors. Murarai-I trails last in terms of school infrastructure and drop-out rate.

Instances of drop-out in rural areas is alarming, after enrolment due to social and economic pressure many discontinue their study<sup>6</sup>.

**School Infrastructure:** It is important to emphasize on the schools that are lagging behind others in terms of infrastructural aspects. The analysis is done to find out whether it is lack of adequate school infrastructure or the wider socio-economic context that has greater influence on spread of primary education. There are also issues regarding the quality of education<sup>7</sup>.

What is commendable is that in Birbhum the percentage of primary schools having no drinking water facility has come down from about 20 percent to 6 percent and the percentage of elementary schools without provision of toilet has gone down from about 18 percent to 7 percent. Along with these two indicators, information on school building and number of classrooms, numbers of teachers are equally important to access school infrastructure.

Birbhum is more favourably placed in terms of two indicators-the pupil-teacher ratio and the percentage of school having single teacher. The pupil-teacher ratio for the district as a whole stands at 39:1 which is below the average for West Bengal and also the national norm of 40:1. Only 3.6 percent of primary schools are single-teacher schools, which is commendable.

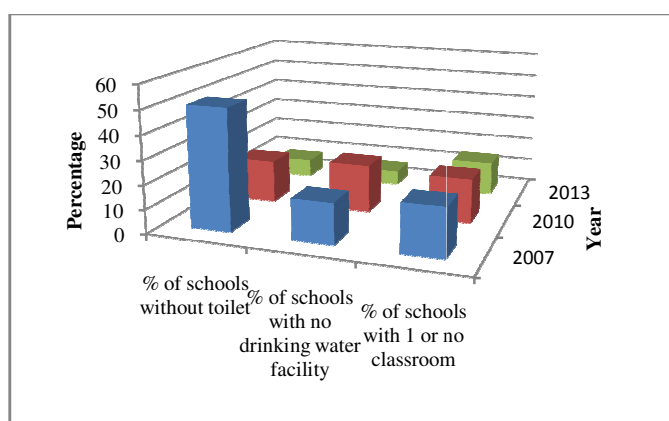


Figure-9

#### Infrastructural Aspects of Primary Schools, Birbhum (2012)

The ratio of primary schools to upper primary and secondary schools is a crucial factor in universalizing of elementary education, as it motivates pupils to carry on their study. In this district roughly for every 6 primary school there is 1 secondary school. This lack of secondary schools nearby may have a negative effect on the students' desire to continue their studies.

Ranking of the rural blocks of Birbhum on the basis of infrastructure was done taking into account parameters like pupil-teacher ratio, pupil-classroom ratio, percentage of schools with inadequate classrooms, percentage of female teachers, percentage of schools with low teacher-strength, ratio of primary and secondary schools. It was seen that Bolpur-Sriniketan, followed by Mayureswar-I and Nanoor topped the

chart while Rajnagar, Murarai-I and Dubjarpur got the dubious distinction of frontrunners from the bottom<sup>8</sup>.

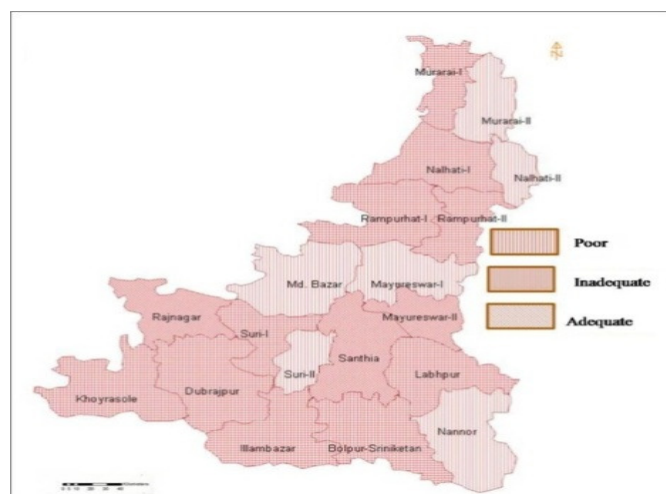


Figure-10

#### Gradation According to Number of Classrooms per School, Birbhum, (2012)

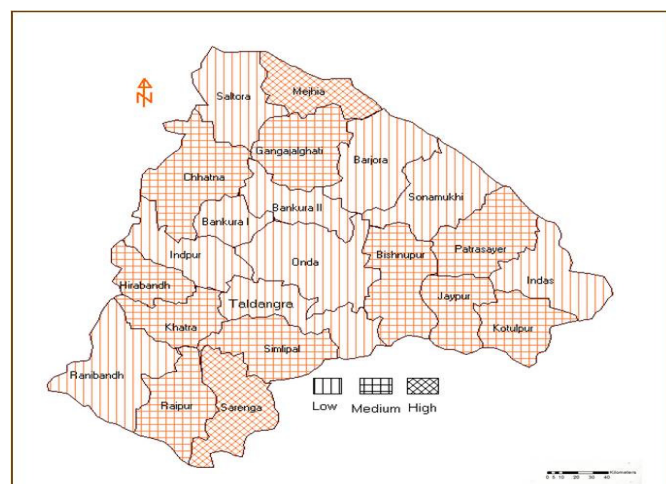


Figure-11

#### Infrastructural Aspects of Primary Schools, Bankura (2012)

The case is bit different for Bankura. The overall pupil-teacher ratio in primary schools is a dismal 37.4, while there are certain blocks like Patrasayer, Hirabandh, Saltora where it is worse. For the middle and high school the quality of education offered does not change much, the ratio is as high as 65 for the blocks-Kotulpur and Sarenga. The national norm is to provide 10 square feet for each child. But in Bankura there are 2188 primary schools where the student-space ratio is less than 7 square feet<sup>8</sup>.

A serious negotiation with the community is necessary in this regard so that private land can be acquired for setting up specious schools.

**Adult Literacy Programmes:** The adult literacy programme was initiated in the early nineties, which did not attain much success, leaving a large number of adult illiterates in Birbhum. Even the positive gains from the programme were very short-lived as the neo-literates lost their literacy skills due to lack of continuing education programmes. For about 7.5 lakhs of illiterates and neo-literates in the rural parts of the district there are only around 2050 Continuing Education Centres (CEC). Besides, due to lack of assessment initiatives regarding CECs it is hard to judge how many of them are functioning properly. Due to low financial allocation even the honorarium that the teachers i.e. the *preraks* and *saha-preraks* are irregular and they lose the motivation for the work. Unlike enrolment status adult literacy rate changes slowly. However, it affects child enrolment since it is known fact that literate parents are more eager to send their children to school, as they realise the value of education.

In Bankura Total Literacy Campaign (TLC) was launched in 1990. The final evaluation was made in June, 1992. After completion of TLC, Post Literacy project was initiated with the objective of helping the semi and neo-literates in strengthening and stabilising their acquired literacy skill and were helped by Continuing Education Programme, which was launched in April, 1999. The programme to eradicate the residual illiteracy has certain objectives: special emphasis is given on 15-35 age-group with a special attention to women and backward and vulnerable groups<sup>9</sup>.

**Role of Mid-day Meal Scheme:** Initially West Bengal government introduced cooked mid-day meal in five districts out of which Birbhum was one. Initially 200 schools of two blocks- Suri- II and Sainthia were taken into its fold. Then gradually the programme was extended in other blocks too. In 2005, a survey was done covering schools serving and not-serving mid-day meals and it was predictably noted that there was almost 10 percent increase in attendance in schools serving mid-day meals. What was remarkable was the positive impact of the programme on the children of the disadvantaged groups. The attendance of girls belonging to the scheduled tribe community was as high as 25 percent, so it had a really positive role in attracting students.

However, it is not free from hindrances too. The provision of meal by the central government under this head covers 220 days, but often the number of school days per annum is greater than that and there is a problem of allotment. In appointment of contractual teachers, cooks often the local party-political dynamics have often played a counter-productive role. Often the lacklustre construction of kitchen shed has been attributed to misuse of fund and lack of proper management. Complaints regarding quality of the food-grains, irregular supply demand more vigilance and accountability.

In Bankura, Mid-day Meal programme was launched in about 100 schools of Ranibandh and Indus blocks in January, 2004<sup>12</sup>. Its success led its spread over other blocks covering all primary

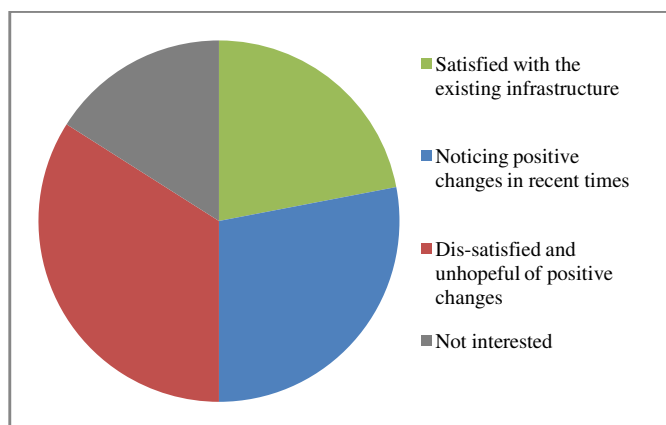
schools and Sishu Siksha Kendras. In line with the general guideline provided by the state government, the district prepared its own plan to make the grain and fund readily available to the schools under this scheme. As the Self-Help Groups were involved in procuring and cooking of the ingredients the teachers did not suffer from losing their teaching time and on the other hand it offered gainful employment to the village-women. Provision for cooking/kitchen sheds were also made to carry out the job hassle free. This programme has jointly addressed the issue of child nutrition and primary education. The increase in attendance rate is a critically important issue. The district has a high concentration of socially and economically backward communities which has added enormous relevance to the Mid-day Meal programme. The effectiveness of the scheme in bringing the children of the disadvantaged groups into the realm of primary education is vital<sup>10</sup>.

In addition to this, it has also helped in reducing the gap between different caste hierarchies. Initially there were instances of untouchability and refusal of meals but gradually the caste discriminating attitude among the children have reduced drastically. The success of this magnitude has led the administration to ponder over the extension of the scheme up to the upper primary level too. But, the supervision and monitoring of the programme has not been appropriate, there are loopholes in the policies and the department is understaffed<sup>11</sup>. There has been a close correlation between larger public involvement in the programme and its level of success.

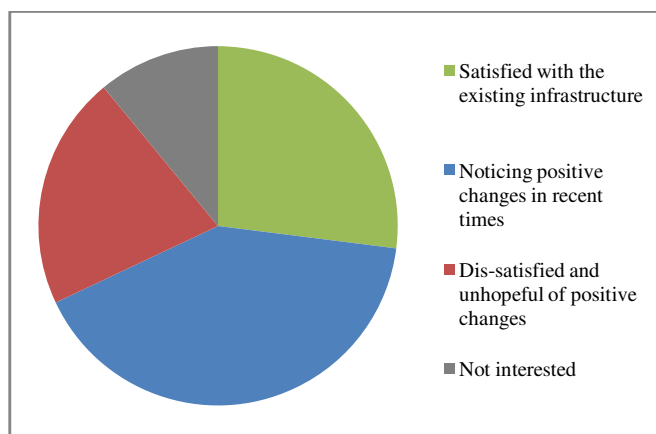
**Perception Study:** From the primary surveys carried in selected blocks. In case of Bankura out of 22 blocks, 4 blocks have been covered: Bankura-I, Mejia, Ranibandh and Patrasayer which show high inter-variation. The residents of Mejia and Ranibandh were very dissatisfied with the existing primary school infrastructure. In Birbhum, the situation was bit different; here also 4 blocks have been survey out of 19 covering Bolpur-Sriniketan, Suri-II, Md. bazaar and Nalhati-I, but the residents were more content with the available infrastructure and were hopeful of a brighter future in the near future.

Many of the respondents felt that only mere school education was not enough, private tuitions were a necessity as most them were first generation learners and had no one to guide at home<sup>12</sup>.

**Way-out:** To achieve required goals in literacy, simultaneous emphasis in two distinct areas is needed: universalizing of primary education and continuing education programme. Quality of education along with an assured future can only attract children towards education. In view of the bottleneck indicated above following interventions have to be taken up to improve the situation:



**Figure-12**  
**Perception Study of Bankura (2013)**



**Figure-13**  
**Perception Study of Birbhum (2013)**

Attainment of high level learning requires requisite tool for interactive teaching and learning materials which are lacking in this case. Regular monitoring of the progress of the students is needed to identify their areas of weakness. Instead of the prevailing system of yearly examination at the end of an academic year, regular periodic tests would be more effective in judging the progress of the primary students.

Vocational training programme along with regular academic curriculum would attract the out of school girl children, which would assure them a viable livelihood option later on. Since, people are the major stakeholder of any policy taken up for the society, active community participation is necessary in any schemes taken up<sup>13</sup>.

The recent study reveals that the school attendance has increased perceptibly after the introduction of the Mid-Day Meal programme; this can be extended wider to attract the drop-outs and out-of school children. Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) can be associated with the primary education set-up then continuity can be maintained<sup>14</sup>.

## Conclusion

Though the situation apparently seems to be grim, the positive changes over the last few years cannot be overlooked. Apart from spreading awareness about the need for education, providing infrastructure and quality education, another thing which has to be ensured is the utility of education. Only the idea of gaining knowledge will not attract students, who face hardship to earn their basic livelihood; there has to be an assurance about employment generation which may be through mainstream education or vocational trainings. Initiatives have been taken in the right path, the positive impact of the various schemes discussed and the eagerness among the locals to get involved in the educational system with a dream to secure a better future indicate that extensive spread of primary education in the rural areas of the said districts will be achieved in near future.

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