

Dream Deferred

Girl-Child Education

in Post-COVID Kolkata



Poushali Basak

A Report

Dream Deferred: Girl-child Education in Post-covid Kolkata

POUSHALI BASAK

Published by:

Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group (CRG)

IA-48, Sector-III, Ground Floor

Salt Lake City, Kolkata-700 097

India

www.mcrgh.ac.in

Printed by:

Graphic Image

New Market, New Complex, West Block

2nd Floor, Room No. 115, Kolkata-87

This publication is brought out with support of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research (CIFAR). It is a part of the research programme on “Humanity’s Urban Future”.

Contents

About the Author	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Executive Summary	vi
Section 1: Introduction and Background	1
Section 2: Methodology	7
Section 3: Enrollment Pattern in City Public Schools	11
Section 4: The reality of drop-outs in city Govt. schools	19
Section 5: Why children do not attend schools?	21
Section 6: Violent Homes, Neighbourhoods.....	28
Section 7: Mobiles, Marriage, Romance.....	31
Section 8: Factors Unsettling the Public-School Education System.....	37
Section 9: Role of Community Schools / <i>Pathshalas</i>	43
Section 10: In Lieu of a Conclusion.....	48
Select Bibliography.....	52

About the Author

Poushali Basak is a researcher at Calcutta Research Group. She holds a PhD from TISS Mumbai and is part of feminist, queer and democratic rights movement spaces. Her research interests are in the areas political and the urban, gender and education, feminist, queer and anti-caste movements, gender and development.

Acknowledgements

This report is an outcome of a pilot study done in Kolkata from September 2024 to March 2025. It is part of the research activities under CIFAR (Canadian Institute for Advanced Research) Fellow, Ranabir Samaddar, Professor Emeritus, Calcutta Research Group (CRG). It contributes to the scholarship, debates, workshops, deliberations on cities and urbanization, working at the intersections of gender, education and the urban.

This project would not have been possible without the research participants, who opened up and shared their lived experiences and insights thoroughly. I express my gratitude to each participant for valuable insights.

I want to thank Emeritus Professor Ranabir Samaddar for his guidance, implorations and timely check for research progress. I am thankful to Dr. Sabir Ahamed for sharing his knowledge and insights from the field and for supervising the summary of the quantitative data. I want to thank Ashin Chakraborty and Sohel Reja for working on the UDISE+ reports and filtering the Kolkata level data. I want to thank Dr. Samata Biswas and Rituparna Datta for creating an opportunity to discuss this work. Last but not the least, I want to express sincere thanks to all my colleagues at CRG for lending me support in this work.

I am extremely grateful to Professor Nandini Manjrekar for her guidance and feedback. I want to specifically thank Dr. Manabi Majumdar for sharing with me her reflections, vision and philosophical aspects about public school education, which have been shifting rapidly in contemporary years.

Executive Summary

The research study focusses on the meaning and practice of public schooling in Kolkata, specifically trying to understand school drop-outs, enrollment patterns centering around girl children but also analysing overall trends. It specifically elaborates on post-Covid challenges in school education, with massive socio-economic shifts and the introduction of mobile phone for digital learning. Simultaneously it interrogates the situation of government schools and the public education system itself which have been struggling with the entry of private schools and changes at policy levels. The participants here are adolescent girls and women from poor, marginalised communities in the neighbourhoods of Kalighat, Charu Market, Patuli, Kasba, Tala, Munshiganj, Rajabazar and Salt Lake and teachers of schools and pathshalas.

Research studies on ‘girl child’ education indicate the high level of drop-outs, even after introduction of several government welfare schemes in West Bengal in the last 10 years. National Family Health Survey - NFHS-5 (2019-21) indicates how child or early marriage percentage remains the same in West Bengal, which is 41.6%, similar to NFHS-4 in 2015-16 (Ahamed, 22 March 2021). However, most of these studies are conducted in the districts and there is hardly any research on the educational situation in the cities. Public education, especially public schooling in the context of Indian cities become more complex and contentious as it is about the dreams and aspirations of the urban labouring classes. At this juncture, the study tried to map out the needs, aspirations vis-à-vis the situation of public schooling of the ‘girl child’ in post-Covid Kolkata. The questions asked are – What is the pattern of enrollments and drop-outs in state government schools in the city in last 10 years? What are the educational aspirations and needs of young women in the city? What are the challenges faced by young people from marginalised communities in continuing school education and why?

Through some qualitative interviews with teachers in government schools, representatives of women’s organisations, community schools or *pathshalas*, young women and a quantitative analysis of the Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE+) data, from 2011-12 to 2020-21, this research discusses how government school system is not able to meet the needs and aspirations of young adults from poor and marginalised communities. The present public education system though functioning through various welfare measures is not able to retain children in schools due to scarcity of teachers and teaching-learning facilities and infrastructures. Socio-economic shifts in the post-Covid Kolkata also creates economic hurdles, where young adults dropped out of schools in search of jobs. Especially for girls, several interlocked factors of patriarchal violence in family, male gaze and surveillance in neighbourhood and attractions of the neo-liberal digital market play at intersections. Schools though initialising online classes, making mobile phones accessible through welfare schemes, lack of guidance about how to navigate the digital world, immediate attraction of fame, social capital, romantic pursuits and money making become more important through mobile phones than using it for educational purposes. In such a situation instead of instituting inspection, monitoring of schools, evaluation of curriculum and investing in public education, the State is somewhere reclining and creating space for private players in primary, elementary, secondary and higher secondary school education.

Section 1: Introduction and Background

Public Schooling in India

Public education in India, especially public schooling has been going through many challenges and shifts during and post Covid19 pandemic. The situation of the poor, labouring classes in accessing educational services went through massive shifts when exposed to online classes, digital resources. This is not only because of the glaring inequality in accessing and participating in the digital space but also about how to manage the digital world and learn through digital methods. A huge number of school and college drop outs also mark the Covid years. The closure of schools created a different social world, where the habit and meaning of going to schools lessened. According to Nandini Manjrekar without serious, informed, and committed state interventions, those at the margins may be subjected to 'long term, perhaps even intractable, educational disadvantage', as these groups are 'becoming increasingly invisible in policy discourses, as seen in NEP 2020' (Manjrekar 2021).

According to the Census 2011, about 10.1 million (3.9% of the child population) children are engaged in the labour force, either as 'main' or 'marginal' workers (ILO 2017). The ILO report shows how children are into agricultural, industry-based work but mostly in 'other' work in urban areas, denoting various informal sector work. These statistics though an older one, also comments on how many children are away from school. While the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 have lofty visualisations for school education, similar to higher education, it has received critiques for having a narrow vision of education, especially in relationship with social transformation. For instance, the category social and economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs) 'unproblematically homogenises marginalised categories', with no distinction and comment on the specific marginalisations due to class, caste, religion, gender and other social identities, apart from complete silence on education of Muslim communities (Manjrekar 2021).

NEP strengthens the grounds for more and more privatised education and 'deepening structural inequalities' (Bagchi 2020) creating the space for aggressive commercialisation and privatisation of school education. This becomes clearer from the decreasing economic investment of both the Central and State Governments in education. According to the Economic Survey report 2023-24, from the year 2017 to 2024, that is 7 long years, the Central and the State governments together have been spending 2.7% to 2.9% of the country's GDP in education (GOI 2024). In-fact as part of the total expenditure the percentage in education has been falling from 10.7% to 9.2% and as part of social services, the expenditure in education has been falling from 42.4% to 35.3% from 2017 to 2024. Such dismal investment in public education raises questions about

vision of public schooling and higher education. It also demands a review of educational reforms and schemes introduced by the Central and State Govts.

UDISE and AISHE reports

Existing Govt. reports on education point out a marginal statistical increase of enrollment and retention in elementary, secondary and higher secondary levels in schools in West Bengal. According to Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+) reports from 2018-19 to 2021-22 (the Covid years included), the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) of both boys and girls in elementary, secondary and higher secondary levels in Govt. schools are as follows.

Table 1: GER in Elementary, Secondary and Higher Secondary levels in Govt. schools in West Bengal

Years	Elementary	Secondary	Higher Secondary
2018-19	99.3	81.5	51.7
2020-21	108.6	84.8	56.1
2021-22	109.66	84.91	61.49

The table not only points out marginal increase from one year to the next year but also the substantial dropout between secondary and higher secondary levels. The All-India Survey of Higher Education (AISHE) reports documents female GER for the age group of 18-23 years as 26.4% (2018-19) to 27.3% (2019-20) to 28.6% (2020-21) to 28.5% (2021-22). It can be seen how the increase is barely by average 1% each year, with 0.1% decrease between 2021 and 2022.

It can be seen that the issue of retention is a major problem, especially in Govt. schools reported to have high drop-outs, only escalating down the years and more post Covid. Govt. policies like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan 2001 (SSA) and Right to Education Act 2009 (RTE) have helped in improving retention but that does not guarantee learning process and promotion to higher classes (Khasnabis and Chatterjee, 2007). Scholars like Amiya Bagchi attributes the decline in literacy rate in the State of West Bengal from 1951 to 2011 to lack of monitoring on the ground, failure in assessing socio-economic situation, poor implementation of Govt. schemes, privatization of education and corruption, unethical practices in the network of the ruling regimes (Bagchi 2017).

Drop-out statistics in West Bengal

A recent research study from Institute of Development Studies (IDSK) mapping girl's education and impact of Govt. schemes like Kanyashree in West Bengal brings insight into the high level of drop-outs in Govt. schools, due to primarily 'financial problems and disinterest in education' and in case of girls, marriage and

domestic engagements (Mukherjee and Mukherjee 2020). The MoHRD report ‘Secondary Education Flash Statistics 2015-16’ indicates drop-out rate is higher for girls - 19.06 than boys - 16.33 (Bandyopadhyay et al 2017). While the IDSK study conducted in 3 districts of West Bengal – North 24 Parganas, Burdwan District and Kolkata identifies child and early marriage as the core reason for female drop-outs in schools, another study attributes reasons for female drop-outs to socio-cultural, ‘gendered settings’ of classrooms (Chaudhuri and Bhattacharya 2022).

Extending education to work, though there is ‘statistical swelling in female participation rates at work’ (Sarkar 2017) in West Bengal, there are questions on quality and kind of employment. Existing scholarship shows the excessive huge number of female workforces in domestic paid work, nursing, care economy characterizing informal female workforce in West Bengal (Chakraborty and Chakraborty 2009). While there are many researches in recent times interrogating the concerns around gender, education and livelihood, the questions of female education, particularly that of public schooling, college education and work trajectory has been rapidly transforming in the last few years and thus demands renewed attention.

Rationale and Lit Review - Why and how the ‘girl child’ in Kolkata?

Existing literature researching on gender and education debates on how difficult it has been to retain girls in schools and the escalating drop outs over the years. The social locations of the ‘girl child’ are most important here, mediated by patriarchal, class, caste, religious, ethnic power hierarchies. The ‘girl child’ is subjected to a cycle of violence within Indian natal family and at community, neighbourhood levels. They are socialized to do domestic work at home while they go to schools and prepare for marriage from young age. As Manabi Majumdar discusses, girls’ rights to education are a contested terrain and often internal operations within natal family cannot ensure care, love and justice (Majumdar 2021, 193) especially in case of lower income groups and marginalized social identities. According to Sachar Committee report, Muslim women’s literacy is below the national average and there is a distinct link between poverty and illiteracy. Primary Completion Rate (PCR) of Muslim girls is higher than boys but numbers fall beyond middle school, as higher up the school ladder (Samanta 2016).

The ‘girl child’ subject is produced as the common trope at the intersections of the Indian state and feminist discourses for creating constitutional and legal measures to protect girl children and women from patriarchal discrimination in India. The ‘girl child’ and would be woman here is ‘cis, heterosexual, reproductive, familial’ (Achuthan 2019, 265). How much the Kanyashree Prakalpa (KP) and different state Govt. and Central Govt. schemes like Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao have been impactful for ‘girl child’ education is one part of the debate. Recent studies on Kanyashree Prakalpa situated mostly in the districts of West Bengal, analyses reduced probability of child marriage by 6.7 percent and increased probability of

secondary and higher secondary attainment by 6 percent and shows how KP is a ‘transformative policy’ that has helped in ‘girl child’ education and empowerment (Dey and Ghosal 2021, 1-35). However, there is no study in Kolkata to understand the impact of KP. To understand the educational aspirations of women in the city, one has to intervene in the situation of Govt schools, drop-outs, curriculum in the last few years and also situate it in the larger macro politics of educational aspirations driven by the market. While Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao have been the latest initiatives by Central Govt. vis-à-vis the Kanyashree, Medhashree, Aikashree, Sabuj Sathi and several others schemes in West Bengal at state level, it can be seen that retaining girl children in education is still a challenge, more so, in post Covid times.

The crucial debates around child and early marriages phenomenon in several Indian states, argue how age of marriage and women’s employment are enmeshed in Indian society and how marriage becomes work for women (John 2020, 278-284). Mary E. John’s work on child and early marriage and Samita Sen, Nilanjana Sengupta’s work on domestic workers in Kolkata in late 2000s show how education, employment and marriage play an ‘interlocked’ (Sen and Nilanjana, 2012) contested terrain for young women in Indian cities, where though education is a significant aspiration for urban poor, it is often disrupted by early and compulsory marriage or employment. Such studies establish how it is women from low-income brackets, at the margins of social hierarchies, who are prone to early and ‘compulsory’¹ marriages (John 2020, 285). Not only that, whatever the educational aspirations of the urban poor women, it often spirals back to ‘feminised and traditional sectors’ (Ghosh et. All 2022, 61-62) as domestic worker, beautician, ayah in the informal sector. Some new avenues like food delivery services in Swiggy, Zomato, as cab drivers in Sakha, TaxShe, Koala Cabs though sometimes only restricted to ferrying women and school children have opened up recently in last few years in the ever-widening gig economy (Ghosh et. all 2022). However, there is not enough study tracing this transition from school education to employment in the urban gig economy of the working-class women in urban India.

The city here becomes an important point of intervention, as aspirations and lived realities are very much different in the city for the labouring class, migrating from rural regions or other states. Scholars like Lipman has argued how ‘education is integral to the neoliberal agenda’ and reforms in schooling are complicit to the transformation of cities (Lipman 2010, 249). Educational aspirations and also disruptions

¹ According to Mary E. John (2020) poverty more than culture shapes early and compulsory marriage (regardless of age, marriage is destiny, a societal demand that cannot be refused) in India. Cycle of poverty and gendered discrimination – Trends of early marriage high in the both rural and urban. Girls are often forced to leave schools due to financial reasons, unemployment. Marriage is work. Young women spoke about torture of married life. More regret than satisfaction. Lack of healthcare, nutrition, economic hardships are reasons for leaving education and early marriage.

are directly connected to constant shift in urban land usage through urban infrastructural and developmental projects, leading to evictions, resettlement and inter-city or inter-state migration. The crisis, challenges and risks in urban life has been only becoming complex and multifaceted, especially for the labouring class or urban poor with neoliberalisation and globalization. Scholars enumerate how private education surged in India with rapid urbanization, liberalization of 1990s, in comparison to state run schools. So much so, that in 2013, private unaided schools comprised 60% of schools in urban India and 69% of all enrollments (Nambissan 2017).

Growing demand for English medium private schools by the urban middle class is also imitated by the lower-class fractions, for which the already private sector in education expanded to provide ‘differentiated private schools in terms of cost and quality’ (Nambissan 2012). The mushrooming of low cost private schools in cities, targeting lower income groups is a new character in the globalizing economy, a part of the unregulated ‘shadow economy’ (Nambissan 2017). Also known as ‘low fee’ schools, not recognized by State Education Act and Right to Education Act 2009, have grown in low-income, poor neighbourhoods to cater to the urban aspirations of the poor, where Govt. schools are inadequate and of poor quality. ‘Shadow education’ including tutorial centres, coaching institutes (Majumdar 2014) along with low-cost private schools have become the characteristic of the precarious urban economy. Nambissan discusses demolition of slums and systematic displacement of urban poor also as a cause for drop out in schools which in turn also leads to ‘rationalization’ of schooling by closing down schools, where enrolment is dropping, very much a case in Kolkata and Vijaywada (Nambissan 2017). The growing market for private education in India as an integral part of the rapidly urbanizing economy produces and re-produces the spatial and the aspirational urban of contemporary times, something that has not been studied enough and probably demands our attention.

Objectives

Drawing on existing literature, this particular study aims at finding out educational aspirations and challenges faced by young women from marginalised class-caste locations and of a particular age group (13 to 21 years) in the city of Kolkata. It specifically focuses on the social, economic and political challenges faced by young urban women in Kolkata from marginalised class-caste and religious locations in accessing and sustaining school and college education. Who is the ‘girl child’ accessing public schooling in the city? What are changes through State Govt. schemes? What is the situation of enrollment, drop-outs, retention of girls in state run schools? Why is there still a high percentage of drop-outs? What are the social, familial, economic challenges faced? Is early marriage a phenomenon in the city and if not, what is the nature of ‘interlockedness’ between education and marriage in the city? Is the formal school and college education

able to address the social, educational needs and aspirations of the young urban poor? These are some of the major questions addressed in this research.

One part of the study analyses the situation of girl child education from Govt. data, mainly UDISE+ reports, looking at school enrollment at elementary, secondary, higher secondary levels, gender wise and social category wise. The larger part of the study focusses at conducting in-depth interviews and group discussions with teachers in schools, educators from *pathshalas* / community schools, and young women from slums in different locations in the city. The aim has been to look at low-income and socially marginalised communities (schedule castes and Muslims) - people living in slums, who have been availing Govt. education services. The analysis is drawn by corroborating and triangulating the quantitative data with qualitative accounts, interviews of people.

Section 2: Methodology

This study draw from both quantitative and qualitative data collection. Quantitative method is used for extracting data from UDISE+ or Unified District Information System for Education Plus Govt. reports. This helped to understand the trends of enrollment in Govt. schools, social category wise and gender-wise. UDISE+ was developed by the Indian Government under the Ministry of Education to facilitate the process of collecting school details, specifically the factors relating to schools and its resources. The data is collected not only across the states but across the districts within a state, where information comprises various parameters ranging from school types, enrollments, infrastructure, teachers etc. As clearly specified by the UDISE+, the school acts as a unit of data collection whereas the district, the unit of data distribution.

Here UDISE+ data for the state of West Bengal for the years 2011-12, 2015-16 and 2020-21 has been used. The unit level data specifically for the Kolkata district has been extracted from the main data file by filtering out the district name and hence generating a new “Kolkata” district information set. Post that we have summarized the total enrollment across all levels of education specifically for Kolkata. The total enrollment has been calculated for primary, upper primary, secondary and higher secondary level. It is not only based on boys’ and girls’ enrolment, but also in terms of social categories – that is, enrollment of SC, ST, OBC, Muslim and General category boys and girls respectively. Data has been presented based on school management, primarily categorized as either State Government run or Private or Others.

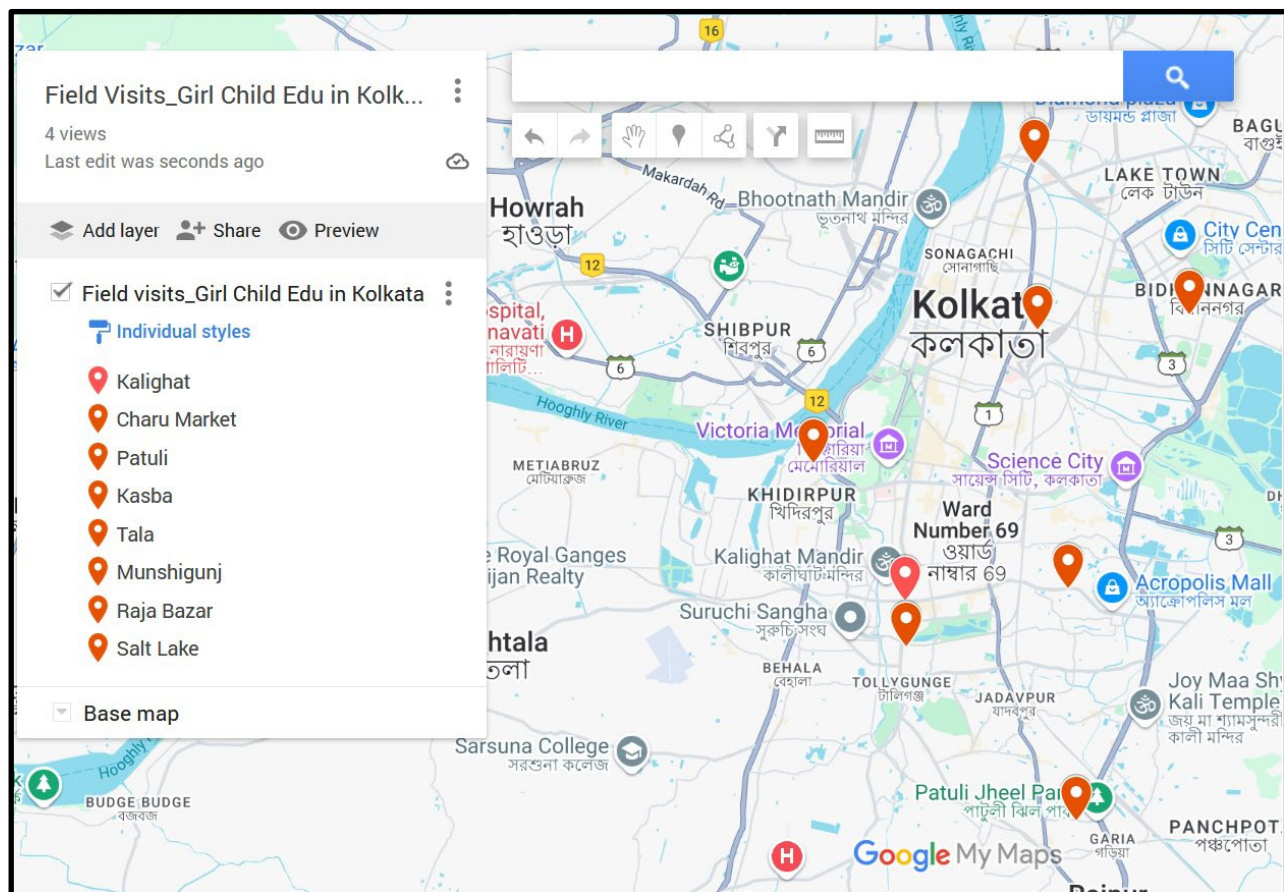
The qualitative part consists of interviews with school teachers and administrators; educators of community schools / *pathshalas*² and feminist organisations and with few adolescent girls and young adults. The method employed for this was cluster sampling. Organisations and community pathshalas working with adolescent children in different parts of the city were identified and one started establishing connections. Connection was built with four community *pathshalas* in Kolkata that started during Covid time – *Batighar Pathshala* in Kalighat, *Sanghati School* in Tala, Salt Lake and Gariahat, *Pritilatar Pathshala* in Charu Market and *Rokeya Shikhsa Kendra* in Patuli. The educators/ organizers of these community *pathshalas*

² Community schools or *pathshalas* are a few initiatives that started in the city of Kolkata during Covid time and still continues. These initiatives were taken by college and University students and / activists who became active during Covid relief work – mainly distributing food, resources. The interaction with slum communities in different neighbourhoods led to a longer relationship, where getting involved with children through education, art, performances became a practice. The aim of these *pathshalas* have not only been about academic assistance to school education but engaging with children from such marginalised communities in meaningful ways through creative art forms and also prioritising their everyday struggle and lived realities. In a way, such *pathshalas* come from Left political praxis, where the objective has been to politicise young people through their everyday struggles, formal education and creative art forms.

were interviewed and wherever possible, group discussion was held with adolescent girls. Apart from *pathshalas*, one also connected with two NGOs in this context - DIKSHA, working with sex worker's children in Kalighat and Roshni, working with adolescent and young Muslim women in Rajabazar, Kolkata. The number of interviewees - 5 school teachers/ administrators in Govt. schools, 7 educators from community *pathshalas* and organisations, 4 adolescent girls. Interaction with girls happened mainly through group discussions in community *pathshalas* and organisations. Overall, there are 16 interviews and 4 group discussions.

The identities of all the participants have been kept confidential. Their names have been anonymized for ethical concerns. Only their caste, class, religious, gender locations have been used for analysis. I visited two Govt. schools, the names of which are not disclosed for ethical concerns.

Map 1: Neighbourhoods in Kolkata visited for qualitative interviews



Socio-economic profile of participants

It becomes necessary to understand the socio-economic profile of people who were part of these *pathshalas*. When asked names, it could be seen that majority students are Scheduled Castes or Muslims. Kalighat, Tala, Munshiganj, the slum areas of Salt Lake and Patuli particularly constitute the poorest of the poor and thus here most people are of Dalit and Muslim identities. As one of the educators of *Rokeya Shikhsa Kendra* states, the name of the collective was decided through the socio-economic profile of the neighbourhood inhabitants, most of whom are either Muslims or from Dalit identity locations. It also led to the understanding that majority of oppressed caste and Muslim people are from labouring classes.

In all these neighbourhoods, women were mostly into domestic work. In case of Kalighat women were also in sex work. In the *Saltlake basti* many families were into waste picking business. Men were either auto-rickshaw pullers, rickshaw pullers bus drivers, in waste picking, some business in fish market or poultry and different odd jobs. In many cases it was women headed families as the father was absconding. Spatially the research spans over a few southern and northern localities - Kalighat, Patuli, Charu Market, Kasba, Tala, Munshiganj, Rajabazar, and Salt Lake. The *pathshala* was sometimes not a separate space but accommodated within the neighbourhood. The *Rokeya Shikhsa Kendra* in Patuli and *Batighar Pathshala* in Kalighat have rented a separate accommodation for their activities.

Charu Market – The Charu Market neighbourhood has a heterogenous composition, as also elaborated by the *pathshala* people. As described by one of the educators of the Pritilatar Pathshala in Charu Market, it was difficult to set up an informal education circle among children and young adults in the area, as there are hierarchy and competition between families. Charu market slum is a mixed neighbourhood, where different families have come and settled at different points of time. Some are migrants from neighbouring states, some from Bangladesh, some from the districts of West Bengal. There is no sense of fraternity in the community. The neighbourhood is fractured. This fragmented character of Charu market is one big challenge from inside. They are embroiled in their own survival. It becomes difficult to bring people together.

The class character is also varied. Families where one parent is a migrant worker in another city is a little better off than families which depends on a single parent or both parents are daily labourers. Most women are domestic workers in the area. Men are drivers, some construction workers, some do not work. All women / mothers are working. They are very active. The earning capacity being different in different families, some children go to private schools also, though most families send children to Govt. schools.

Kalighat – Kalighat did not having families from different class-caste character, which meant it is almost a homogeneous neighbourhood. But this does not mean that there is a prevailing sense of fraternity and

good relationships between families. This is probably a very typical characteristics in the city, where families of marginalised socio-economic locations keep fighting for a better claim to housing, education and livelihood.

Tala and Munshiganj – In both these areas one interacted mostly with the children and thus it was difficult to have insights into the nature of the neighbourhood.

However, whether a mixed, heterogenous neighbourhood or a homogenous neighbourhood, it can be seen that the tension between families in any slum area is very much the socio-economic and aspirational tension. An aspiration which is very much the centre of city life. Aspirations which are very differently dreamt by the parents and children in labouring classes. Aspirations which become necessary to untangle when discussing the meaning, importance and applicability of education for the labouring classes.

Section 3: Enrollment Pattern in City Public Schools

What does Govt. data show us?

The following tables present the number of children attending school, gender-wise and social category wise in Kolkata during the years 2011-12, 2015-16 and 2020-21. All these data sets are generated from West Bengal UDISE+ reports.

Table 2: Total enrollment in schools of Kolkata across all social and gender categories © Sabir Ahamed

Year	ST Enrolment	SC Enrolment	OBC Enrolment	General Enrolment	Muslim Enrolment
2011-12	2766	54180	15641	533125	116675
2015-16	3172	58654	20922	472166	118332
2020-21	4109	47771	18744	513177	122087

From the above table it can be seen that the total number of enrolments in city schools have increased from 2011-12 to 2015-16 across four social categories – ST, SC, OBC and Muslim children, except General category. The rise in number is a slow and steady rise. In 2020-21, the Covid years, there is a significant fall in the number of SC enrolment by 10883 and a marginal fall in number in case of OBC enrolment by 2178. In the same year there is a significant rise in number of general category of students by 41011 and parallel marginal increase in Muslim and ST category of students by 3755 and 937 respectively. What these figures suggest is that apart from the ST and the Muslim category, there is quite a bit of fluctuation in school level enrolment from 2011-2012 to 2015-16 to 2020-21. In fact, there is a steady decrease in enrolment across SC, OBC and General category from 2011-12 to 2020-21. Like the SC category, there is a significant fall in the number of General category of students too from 2011-12 to 2020-21, by 19948. What do these fluctuations suggest? Does the fall in SC, OBC, General enrollment mean these number of students left school entirely? This statistical summary when broken up according to school type and gender differentials brings a more interesting picture.

Table 3: Gender-wise and school wise break-up in ST category enrollment in Kolkata © Sabir Ahamed

School Type	2011-12		2015-16		2020-21	
	ST Boys	ST Girls	ST Boys	ST Girls	ST Boys	ST Girls
Others	143	120	203	206	1137	890
Private	82	120	136	275	540	649
State Government	1242	1059	1265	1087	296	597

Table 4: Gender-wise and school wise break-up in SC category enrollment in Kolkata © Sabir Ahamed

School Type	2011-12		2015-16		2020-21	
	SC Boys	SC Girls	SC Boys	SC Girls	SC Boys	SC Girls
Others	1209	1143	1287	1032	16044	15156
Private	382	657	788	1365	2153	2590
State Government	27573	23216	28805	25377	5592	6236

Table 5: Gender-wise and school wise break-up in OBC category enrollment in Kolkata © Sabir Ahamed

School Type	2011-12		2015-16		2020-21	
	OBC Boys	OBC Girls	OBC Boys	OBC Girls	OBC Boys	OBC Girls
Others	407	288	510	541	4880	2694
Private	130	272	459	715	1710	3142
State Government	9691	4853	11553	7144	3512	2806

Table 6: Gender-wise and school wise break-up in General category enrollment in Kolkata © Sabir Ahamed

School Type	2011-12		2015-16		2020-21	
	Gen Boys	Gen Girls	Gen Boys	Gen Girls	Gen Boys	Gen Girls
Others	21461	23491	15593	15290	94686	100855
Private	57702	60139	65114	68403	83312	91350
State Government	177325	193007	143603	164163	65892	77082

Table 7: Gender-wise and school wise break-up in Muslim category enrollment in Kolkata © Sabir Ahamed

School Type	2011-12		2015-16		2020-21	
	Mus Boys	Mus Girls	Mus Boys	Mus Girls	Mus Boys	Mus Girls
Others	4697	7246	6918	7329	24185	36018
Private	6359	7035	6633	9144	11324	14344
State Government	41874	49464	40104	48204	18651	17565

A closer analysis of above tables suggests how enrolment and retention in State Government schools have drastically dropped in the Covid years 2020-21, compared to 2015-16 and 2011-12. This is true across all the social categories – SC, ST, OBC, General and Muslims. What is more striking is the parallel rise in numbers of enrollment in ‘Private’ and ‘Other’ category schools. For example, if the number of total enrollments of ST girls is taken, there is a steady rise from 1299 in 2011-12 to 1568 in 2015-16 to 2136 in 2020-21. But not only is the increase in number reflected in the private category schools but also there are significant drop-outs from Govt. schools which increases number in private and other type of schools. The fall in state Govt. enrollment of ST category girls is from 1087 in 2015-16 to 697 in 2020-21, by a differential of 490.

In case of SC category girls there is a marginal increase, 25016 in 2011-12 to 27774 in 2015-16 and then a fall to 23982 in 2020-21. But like the ST category, there is drastic shift to private and other category enrollment in 2020-21. The State Govt. school enrollment of SC category girls fall from 25377 in 2015-16 to 6236 in 2020-21, that is a differential of 19141.

In case of OBC category girls there is a substantial rise in enrollment, 5413 in 2011-12 to 8400 in 2015-16 and then a very marginal increase to 8642 in 2020-21. What is again striking is that the state government enrollment falls from 7144 in 2015-16 to 2806 in 2020-21, by a differential of 4388.

In case of General category girls, the total number of enrolments between these years remain almost same, that is 276637 in 2011-12 to 247856 in 2015-16 to 269287 in 2020-21. What is different is the fall in number of state government school enrollment from 2011-12 to 2015-16 by 28844 and from 2015-16 to 2020-21 by 87081. This shift from government schools to private and other schools is reflected in a longer duration only escalating in the last one decade.

In case of Muslim category girls there is a marginal increase in enrollments from 63745 in 2011-12 to 64677 in 2015-16 to 67927 in 2020-21. The enrollment in state government schools fall by 1260 numbers between 2011-12 to 2015-16 and by 30639 numbers from 2015-16 to 2020-21.

The statistical data in case of boys show very similar trends but only that there are much less enrolments through the years in comparison to girls. This is true across all social categories. The total enrolment in case of ST boys is 1367 in 2011-12 to 1604 in 2015-16 to 1973 in 2020-21. The total enrolment in case of SC boys is 29164 in 2011-12 to 30880 in 2015-16 to 23789 in 2020-21. The total enrolment in case of OBC boys is 10228 in 2011-12 to 12522 in 2015-16 to 10102 in 2020-21. The total enrolment in case of General category boys is 256488 in 2011-12 to 224310 in 2015-16 to 243890 in 2020-21. The total enrolment in case of Muslim boys was 52930 in 2011-12 to 53655 in 2015-16 to 54160 in 2020-21.

What stands out from the statistical data are,

- a) very marginal increase in overall school enrollments from 2011-12 to 2020-21 across all social categories except SC category, where there is a fall from 2015-16 to 2020-21 for both boys and girls
- b) drastic fall in enrollments in state government schools from 2015-16 to 2020-21 in case of ST, SC and OBC categories and from 2011-12 to 2020-21 in case of General and Muslim category students
- c) the drastic fall in enrollments across all social categories from 2015-16 to 2020-21 is a substantial number of students
- d) there is subsequent rise in enrollment in private and other category schools, more from 2015-16 to 2020-21
- e) the data trend is similar in case of enrollments of boys across all social categories, except that the overall number of enrollment of boys have been dropping compared to girls

It needs to be elaborated here that the State Govt. schools here constitute Schools under Department of Education, Tribal Welfare and local bodies like Municipal Corporation, which means schools directly under management and supervision of the State Govt. The 'other' category includes Private Aided, Private Unaided, Central Govt., Army Schools, Unrecognised, Madrasa recognised and Madrasa Unrecognised schools. All the schools that fall beyond the realm of Private and State funded education have been encompassed in the Other Category. Why this drastic shift to the 'private' and 'other' category schools from state government schools during 2015-16 to 2020-21 can be understood and analysed from the qualitative interviews in the following sections of the report. Another table gives a statistical overview of total enrollment in primary, upper primary, secondary and higher secondary levels in city schools from 2011-12 to 2015-16 to 2020-21.

Table 8: Total enrollment across all levels in schools in Kolkata

Year	primary_total	upp.primary_total	secondary_total	hr.secondary_total
2011-12	267732	104242	125959	96396
2015-16	218034	148455	102264	86161
2020-21	278818	182666	130598	121363

It can be seen that there has been huge number of drop outs from primary to upper primary across all the years, 163490 that is highest in 2011-2012, that slightly improved to 69579 in 2015-16 to 96152 in 2020-21. Between upper primary and secondary levels, there is an increase in enrolments only in 2011-12, while in 2015-16 and 2020-21 there is substantial drop-out between upper primary and secondary level. The enrollment numbers drastically fall in 2015-16, the difference being 46191. The difference only increases in 2020-21, the number of drop-outs being 52068. Again, there is drop out between secondary and higher secondary level across all the years, which seems to have improved gradually from 2011-12 to 2020-21. From the above table it becomes clearer that drop outs are most between primary level and upper primary level and between upper primary and secondary levels that is between classes 8 to 9. When students reach and sustain in the secondary levels, there are more chances of being promoted to classes 11 and 12. But since this data is across all types of schools, it does not bring out the specific situation of Govt. schools in Kolkata.

The above tables create the picture of the enrollment and drop out trend in the city. It is very clear that the situation has worsened in the Covid years, especially in case of state government schools. But apart from the Covid years, there is a static rise in overall enrolment across social categories, particularly reflected in the gender distribution in case of Govt. schools. This also leads one to interrogate whether the state government schemes have worked specifically in case of girl children. Increased enrollment in case of girls, compared to boys also makes it necessary to have a review of the state government schemes for ‘girl child’ education.

It is important to see that all the schemes for girl children were launched in the last 10 years. *Kanyashree* was introduced in October 2013. *Shikhasree* was introduced in 2014 for financial assistance to SC, ST students and minimise incidence of drop-out. It was launched for SC, ST day scholars studying in Classes V to VIII. For supporting educational and socio-economic mobility in Minority communities, *Aikyashree* scheme for Minority Students was launched in 2019-20. To provide financial assistance to Other Backward Class (OBC) communities and with a view of providing them with more avenues for socio-economic and educational development, *Medhashree* – pre-metric scholarship for classes V to VIII in Government/

Government Sponsored/ Government Aided Schools was introduced in West Bengal from 2022-23 onwards. The increased enrollment and steady retention of girl children compared to boys, across all social categories from 2011 to 2021 may be a result of the financial support through all these schemes. What kind of further impact is created between secondary and Higher secondary levels can probably be analysed better through Kanyashree Prakalpa. Though debated much more than other schemes, the impact of *Kanyashree* demands attention as it specifically addresses school education in secondary and higher secondary levels and is designed differently from the others.

Kanyashree Prakalpa

Differentiating between *Apni Beti Apni Dhan* (ABAD) and *Kanyashree Prakalpa* (KP), Sen and Dutta, 2018 observes, though both are Conditional Cash Transfer (CCTs) schemes, it is only Kanyashree Prakalpa that ensures the continued education of girls post the secondary level and that they remain unmarried till 18 years. The first annual incentive of Rs. 1000/- to be paid from 13 to 18 years - studying Class VIII or equivalent and provided that they remain in education every year and are unmarried all along this time is the first phase of KP. The second one-time grant transfer of Rs. 25000/- is paid after turning 18 years, provided the girl is enrolled in school or college and is still unmarried.

Among the positive reviews of *Kanyashree*, scholars deliberate how it has created ‘pathways of education for reducing underage marriage’ (Sen and Dutta 2018). Statistical analysis also shows how there has been greater ‘female school enrolment with no discernible impact on secondary and higher secondary school completion’ (Das and Sarkhel, 2023). The aim of the Govt. through KP has been to strike at the root of this ‘destructive synergy’ between low income, low school life expectancy, and low age of marriage (Bandyopadhyay et. all, 2017). According to school teachers, educators Govt. schemes are the reasons, the supportive system why girls can be retained in schools. It is also a support for those who want to pursue higher studies in colleges. It has definitely helped in alleviating child and early marriage and also trafficking in villages, one of the objectives of such schemes.

As teachers and educators point out, the trend in early and mid-2000s, when many girls were dropping out in several districts of West Bengal could be curtailed from mid 2010s with new set of State Govt. schemes. Taken together these are big incentives for girls in pursuing school and even higher education. Participants express that it is good that the money comes directly to the girl’s account. It is because of Govt. scholarship at college level, that girls are able to pursue higher education. Even availing public transport, whether bus or trains are a big obstacle in very poor families, which middle class citizens do not count. As an educator from a *pathshala* pointed out,

“They cannot avail metro. For us it may be easy to say you avail metro. For going to college, they mainly avail bus and trains. Their travel, book expenses, even if it is second hand books, all these can be covered from Vivekananda scholarship. If they are able to pass plus two level, there are many more schemes which they can avail. The only thing is they need to maintain a record of regularity.” (Educator, Rokeya Shiksha Kendra)

As educators pointed out, it is only because of such financial support through Govt. schemes that it is possible to take responsibility of abandoned girls, which is not the same in case of boys. For girls, such state government schemes continue in colleges too. In case of violent homes, such Govt. schemes often form the backbone of support. The same educator narrated an incident, where a girl of class 11 escaped a violent home, where she was subjected to physical and sexual assault and started staying at Rokeya Shikshya Kendra. Some Pathshalas like Rokeya Shikshya Kendra and Batighar Pathshala try to create a longer support system for children and adolescent students, possible more because of their rented accommodation in the neighbourhood.

“She is with us. If it was a male child, we would not be able to support him. We have taken the girl child’s custody through the child commission. There should be a way of increasing Govt schemes. However, saying all these, one must admit Govt. schemes are not enough.” (Educator, Rokeya Shiksha Kendra)

While this is true and can be somewhat observed in statistical projections, but the direct impact of such schemes is difficult to evaluate. From field level enquiries it can be seen that *Kanyashree* is not enough to retain girls in Govt. schools. The completion of class XII not being mandatory and only registration to schools being necessary, does not ensure completion of Higher Secondary education for girls. Interactions with teachers, students and people working on the ground only implicate that KP and other Govt. schemes are supportive, necessary but it does not ensure completion of Higher secondary and also quality education. KP though conceived to inspire girls for education by clauses of registering themselves at the age of 13, has probably only remained only as a monetary support, not directly amplifying the need for school education. In all the interviews awareness about Kanyashree is there, but it simply remains as a financial support for poor families, only delaying marriage. In many cases it is not also able to stop drop-outs or irregularities of school attendance, as just being registered to schools is the only criteria. Also ground level experience shows that often this money is not utilised by the girl or for the girl and goes into domestic expenses or expenses for the male child, someone sick in the family and more. Most girls are just registered to schools for getting the money and has no connection to studies and leaves school entirely once they get the money.

Along with technical recommendations like skilled human resource at school level, greater convergence between different implementing departments, providing internet facility etc., Pratichi Trust recommends minimum attendance criterion needs to be made compulsory along with the enrollment criterion to ensure educational outcomes for girls. There needs to be separate consistent effort as *Kanyashree* or any government scheme is unable to promote the values and requirement of school education? Pratichi Trust also suggests that girl's dignity should be equated to educational achievements to counter honour being linked to marriage (Bandyopadhyay et. al, 2017). The focus of *Kanyashree* as advertised, conceptualised is only directed to challenge child marriage as understood globally through Sustainable Development Goals, SDGs³ and thus not achieving the compulsoriness of quality school education, learning and school attendance.

Studies and reports show that though child and early marriage can be reduced or alleviated through *Kanyashree* and the other schemes, the same cannot cultivate the requirement and motivation for education. The reason perhaps why the completion of secondary or higher secondary education is not one of the learning outcomes. Das and Sarkhel, 2023 point out that the decline in learning is probably related to issues of physical and learning infrastructure, lower teacher attendance etc. They conclude saying that, in resource-scarce developing countries there is a 'political cost for restructuring the education management system' which the Govt. avoid and use CCT schemes as an eyewash. On a similar note, Manabi Majumdar also argue that the policy talk on gender equality in education has to extend beyond the question of girl's access to schooling and focus on fair educational opportunities for higher educational attainment (Majumdar, 2021: pp190). In a rapidly urbanising world, where the socio-economic divides and tension widen and the social itself is fractured through digital technology it can be seen that Govt. schemes are not enough to make education appealing, meaningful and ensuring completion of school education especially for girls coming from marginalised communities.

³ "Kanyashree and the Agenda 2030" available at https://www.wbkanyashree.gov.in/readwrite/notice_publications/kp_sdg.pdf

Section 4: The reality of drop-outs in city Govt. schools

School teachers, educators shared about the dismal situation in the city Govt. schools, where drop-outs are increasing compared to the suburban and district Govt. schools. On the face people suggested that this is the result of the rapid shifting of students to English medium private schools. A teacher and administrator in a suburban school in Sonarpur shared,

“The city gives a very different picture. The numbers are dwindling... In my school the number last year was 1852. This year it has scaled up to 2100. In today’s context if they have even 350 students in a city school, they are very happy.” (M, School Teacher, Sonarpur)

In the particular suburban school, many girls continue higher education and are placed in formal sector. When asked why numbers of student are becoming single digit in secondary and higher secondary levels, teachers reflect that many schools are not able to recover from the paralysis created during Covid. Once there is a record of the number of students decreasing, it becomes difficult to recover from that situation. Socio-economic shifts during Covid led to many drop-outs from which many schools are yet to recover. Interrogating more it can be seen that such a paralysis is not an individual but a structural issue across many city Govt. schools. In certain Govt. schools, the student strength from class 6 to 12 is 60. The condition is similar in many schools in Garia, Jadavpur, Khidirpur, Sonagachi, Kalighat, Salt Lake.

In the given context, teachers and educators categorised schools in the city as ‘good’ or ‘bad’. The ‘good’ schools are those, which have adequate teachers, students, lots of activities. But especially ‘good’ schools are those where there is minimum care for every child. Schools keep a track about the whereabouts of children. If someone is absent, they call parents/ guardians. Drop-outs are less in ‘good’ schools. It is ensured that the mid-day meal is of good quality. Teachers are also trying to find out mechanisms of how to make studies interesting for children. The ‘bad’ schools are those where no effort is given to know why students are not coming to schools. The common complaint from students and guardians are that classes are not happening, teachers are irregular. No one cares about the regularity and attendance of children registered in the schools, where student strength is dwindling.

The issue is that the number of ‘bad’ schools or in other words, schools where student and teacher numbers are dropping has been increasing in the city. In every neighbourhood there is presence of a few fully functioning schools and many struggling/ decaying Govt. schools. In the decaying state government schools, the situation has become so volatile, that to retain students, schools now deny to produce Transfer Certificates, even if children want to shift to another school. It is a fierce contestation between different

Govt. schools. In this context, the trend is marked by shifting to ‘good’ Govt. schools and also to low-cost private schools. According to the educator at DIKSHA, many people are transferring their children from State Govt. schools to United Missionary (private), Kendriya Vidyalaya (central Govt.). Though it is huge expenditure to sustain formal education in such schools, some families who can afford, are opting for it. Educators also pointed out how some children are leaving formal education altogether.

“There is also another scenario, where people are leaving formal education all together. Maximum drop outs are happening in classes 9 and 10. People go to schools like they are going for a cinema show. Sonagachi is another world. They don’t go to school, neither do they register in the next class.” (Educator, DIKSHA, Kalighat)

Another reason for drop-out is relocation from one part of the city to another, from city to village or another city. In some cases, children come from very poor backgrounds, get registered to a school, then after few months they are missing. This is because the whole family sometimes shift to another city or state for livelihood. Sometimes the family may return or the child returns, but even if he/she gets registered to school, one has to start from the scratch. As one teacher shares,

“The children are sometimes not able to say from where they are coming. There are also children from night shelters. Because parents constantly travel and migrate for work, there is no sense of a stable home. One example is of a boy who got registered to school but then went to Kerala with his parents. He didn’t even study for a year. When and if the parents come back, he will be back. They may shift again.” (S, School Teacher)

It reflects how extreme precarity of work affects school education. Relocation and migration increasingly becoming the characteristic of urban and rural life, especially among the most marginalized, this is another emerging trend post-Covid.

As educators inform, the situation of boys’ schools are more dilapidating than many girls’ schools. This is also because the Govt. schemes are a support only for formal education of girls from oppressed caste-class, religious locations. For boys of same families, there is no way for a return to education. The Govt. schemes as discussed in the previous section have worked well for enrollment and retainment of girls.

There are many factors why Govt. schools are in such bad shape today apart from the economic instability created during Covid. Some of it is discussed in the following sections. What becomes important to recognize from qualitative interviews is the sheer huge number of drop-outs from Govt. schools that corroborates with the statistical data extracted from UDISE+ reports. The following section focuses on why the rising trend of not attending or dropping out from schools for both boys and girls in the city.

Section 5: Why children do not attend schools?

Covid disrupting school habits

According to adolescent girls, Covid destroyed the school system. Studying at home never happened. The disruption during Covid continues in post Covid times. It has been difficult for students to get back to the previous routines of getting up early morning, go to school, then tuitions etc. Even when many have re-adjusted to school system, a substantial percentage is not able to return and adapt. A general disenchantment with school can be identified.

“I think in Govt. schools (don’t know about private ones), the education system is totally destroyed. Like my brother, who keep bunking school every other day. Previously if someone didn’t go to school, they used to call the parents. Now there is no such thing.” (P, participant from Kasba)

“Post lockdown it is totally different. Before this I liked to study. It was easy when things were taught in class. I could understand and remember. During Covid there was no relation with texts and the teaching. I have lost the habit to study.” (N, DIKSHA, Kalighat)

The above two narratives are indicative of some internal changes within school education system during Covid, some technical but also social shift in pedagogical practices. It also vehemently points out how closure of schools during Covid led to a complete alienation from meaning and practices of study. Educators from all the Pathshalas explain how the Covid time has had a negative impact on children. From school to study habits, everything became irregular. Online classes could not and did not help in any form. It only helped to maintain the technicalities and formalities of education. Once away from school, there was a big gap in learning habits and motivation. The motivation to learn have also been negatively impacted. Students say they can still remember texts and stories from previous classes, but the Covid period of two years is blank for them. Being captive at home and not going out has also played negatively on students.

“There are very few children who love to study. When they see that they can carry on without studying, they don’t give much a thought.” (A, *Pritiltar Pathshala*)

The concept of online class or the compulsoriness of a phone device has also been a very challenging problem in many ways. One is, very few families could afford phones. Even when they could, phone as a device has many utilities and attractions. It is not only limited to online classes. A teacher gave an example how during covid, when assignments were given, they would watch YouTube videos and copy paste similar things in projects and assignments. So, students could easily shrug away books and became dependent on phones for easy information and resource. Another problem with online classes is that people don’t really

attend class. They log in, put off the video, wait for attendance and then disappear. Also, as it is elaborated in later sections, young people are more attached to phone devices because of its multiple distractions – games, social media, internet, films etc.

Economic hardships during Covid have also impacted aspirations and continues to do so. Many have been forced to leave schools for work. While girls have been mostly restricted to home, many boys have been pushed into work. One teacher shared the case of three brothers where the youngest one who was good in studies had to drop-out of school and started working in a sweet factory for earning meals two times a day. The older brothers were already working. Father was alcoholic and mother worked in three houses. Many boys have started working in gold shops. And some went to the fish market where their job was to de-scale the fish. Boys used to work before also. But before there was a determination and some interest in studies. It shows how economic burden and rapidly increasing socio-economic disparities make it difficult to psychologically and emotionally adjust to school routines. Now the main question is how to earn money? What are the career options post school or without school? The general attitude is to enter work as soon as possible and start earning money.

Social life, friendships post covid

Among the groups in Kalighat, Munshiganj, Kasba most girls do not have friends in schools in secondary and higher secondary levels. They lost friends due to drop-outs during Covid. The drop-out phenomena have been very unsettling for students themselves and influencing their study and school going habits. Students became irregular to schools because their peers and friends have dropped out. For girls, the circle of friends has mostly been limited to the neighbourhood. If the neighbourhood friends have dropped out of school that became an immediate influence on others. One of the reasons, why people avoid going to schools is because they have lost friends. On the other hand, there is too much fight and enmity between existing classmates.

“I don’t have friends in school. I am in class 11. We are allowed to take smart phones. People spend time on phones. They do not talk to each other. I had one friend called Aparna. But she failed in class 10. Sometimes I call her in my class and we talk.” (I, DIKSHA, Kalighat)

“In school I do not have any friend. Whenever there is friendship, there is quarrel. I suffer a lot because of such conflicts. I can’t share with anyone, not with teachers. You can’t share such things with mothers too.” (P, DIKSHA, Kalighat)

The above narratives speak of difficult social relationships in school. Either there is absence of a familiar peer, friend or there is immediate conflict and hostility with existing peers. Some educators observe that

when girls drop out, they sometimes drop out in a group whether from schools or from *pathshalas*. Overall, school at present in many cases is not creating the space for enough friendships and social relationships. School environment not being very conducive for socialization is one big factor for bunking classes and not attending school.

Widening gap between teaching and student community post Covid

The grievances and complaints about Govt. school education are many, one primary reason being that students are not getting enough guidance, care and support in schools. Guardians and educators of *pathshalas* point out that Govt. schools do not have proper infrastructural and learning facilities. A lot of the grievances are against teachers.

Many students and educators outside formal school system share how teacher behaviour is discouraging. In many cases children face humiliation and aggressive behaviour from teachers which only de-motivate them. In Kalighat, students share how teachers are always misbehaving to the extent they humiliate them about family situations, poverty. This includes humiliating their class-caste status, their mothers' professions. There is an everyday nature to this abusive behaviour. One particular instance is, when a girl wanted to put on the fan in classroom, the teacher remarked, "Did your mother raise you in AC rooms?" However, this is not specific to Kalighat, but such experiences are common in many city schools. A Govt. school teacher herself comments that the psychology and perspective of most teachers in Govt. class schools are not oriented and sensitive to labouring class children.

"They only want to teach good students. Back benchers should remain back benchers. Vulnerable children are neglected, humiliated and abused verbally... There is no care provided for these children in schools. Of course, education policies are responsible for this degradation of Govt. schools. But apart from that it is also due to neglect and discrimination from a majority section of teachers, who are very secured in their job." (S, Teacher in North Kolkata school)

There is generally a tensed relationship between students and teachers in higher classes, where students have been avoiding schools because of such abusive behaviour of teachers. Some people inform that the pressure of retaining students especially in higher classes is so high that in desperation sometimes teachers resort to strict actions and vindictive attitude. Analysing and commenting on this tensed relationship, scholars show how teacher-pupil relations are shaped by systemic issues and institutionalisation of class-caste biases (Balagopalan and Subrahmanian 2003; Nambissan 2009), a particular characteristic of state or public schools, where first generation learners are perceived as 'uneducable'/'unteachable' and parents considered as disinterested in children's learnings (Yunus, 2021). According to Reva Yunus, the failure to recognise the economic and social hardships, strengthen the perception of the 'labouring class children as

unteachable and unmanageable' (Yunus, 2021) and also invisibilise their struggles for learning. It is more about disciplining students than supporting their learning.

Students also complain about method of teaching. Teachers only reading out from books, not explaining to students, the meanings and insights from reading materials have become the norm. Studying becomes an individual matter. Teachers bypass even if students are not able to read and write. Students writing in SMS language is accepted even in examinations.

“Before teachers were motivated. They used to fight between each other regarding taking class. They were very eager and motivated about class. Now it's totally changed. Classes have become irregular.” (D, a participant from Kalighat)

In many instances classes are not happening properly because teachers are on leave. This 'before' alludes to the time before Covid. Separating the time pre-Covid and post-Covid is a recurrent sharing in each interview. What becomes necessary to question here is why and how have there been such a huge gap between teachers and students? What is the sudden change in the system, where it is becoming difficult to revive the student-teacher relationship. Further probing brings out some complex analysis.

There are some systematic changes within school teaching and curriculum where students are feeling alienated. The whole concept of digital learning, online classes have been difficult to adapt to and have also increased the social distance between students and teachers. When back to school post-Covid, there have been no systematic pedagogical methods of integrating the child back to learning processes and the school system. Teaching-learning continued more in a task and assignment-oriented fashion, where inculcation of the child back to the education system suffered. With this, as teachers share, the immense pressure of maintaining and producing numbers of students in each class only backfires, as it does not invest in assessing the needs of most children post the huge gap during Covid and alternately improving pedagogical processes.

One of the systematic changes, again pointing out the widening gap between teaching community and the parental-student community is the irregularity of parent-teachers' meetings. In every school, there are supposed to be parent-teachers' meetings regularly. Apparently the 'good' or functional Govt. schools hold such meetings where parents are consulted, even if chided and scolded by teachers. The class-caste inequality between the teacher and the parents, oftentimes create a situation where parents are just passive recipients of all that is showered upon them from the school administrator and teachers, without much scope for a dialogue. Parents who are mostly daily wage labourers feel more de-motivated through such meetings. Also, it is not that all parents are able to attend such meetings, a small percentage only do. These existing socio-economic inequalities have widened more during and post Covid scenario. Some schools have been

able to recover this widening gap while many others are not able to reconnect with the marginalised families and children.

Substance Abuse

In certain areas like Kalighat, Munshiganj, Tala more and more girls and boys are slipping into addiction, substance abuse. The educator from DIKSHA informed how boys and girls are into substance abuse and addiction in Kalighat and different red-light areas. While there is a lot of positive change in Kalighat, but substance abuse is happening in a huge scale. It is uncontrollable. Educators inform that in the city, somehow it can be still kept on check, not like the districts. Since nurturing these habits do not require a lot of money, adolescent people easily slip into this trade. If one contributes money once and treats others, he/she is treated by others 10 more days. That is how they continue. Some boys have done substance abuse to an extent that it is becoming difficult to treat them even after they went to rehabilitation.

Growing trend of enrolling children in low-cost private schools

Teacher and educators inform how in the current scenario many working class parents want their children to be educated in private, English medium schools. Parents are relying on these private schools more with time because there is somewhere an understanding that it is English education that matters. But what kind of English education, that remains the question. As some educators say, if children can only utter ‘Hello, Good morning’ or ‘I want to go to toilet’, parents are very impressed. How much qualified the private school teachers are, the school curriculum, teaching methods, do not matter. Also, it is a better option and replacement to Govt. schools in certain cases, which do not have proper facilities, infrastructure and accountability. Along with that there is also an increase in the trend of private tuition from very lower classes.

Lack of motivation to study

There is a general apathy towards studies for many children. Many of them find it useless or meaningless since there is no job security post school or college. What is the outcome of studies? - has been one surging question throughout. Why should one study or pursue higher studies if one cannot earn better. What is way forward from schools, from higher education, if there is no job security? Only 12 or 10 pass is required for most of the jobs available and thus there is no need felt to opt for higher education. In fact, only continuing till class 10 is seen as enough for jobs in the gig and platform economy. Young women are more inclined to earn money.

“Also, girls perceive themselves as very average. Even if they complete studies, they choose something ancillary to educational aspirations. That is why opting for nursing, beautician course.

They cannot think beyond that. They have a self-image for themselves. Also, society create an image of them.” (A, Educator, Pritilatar Pathshala)

In Rajabazar area there are examples of girls pursuing even higher studies till BA, MA. Unlike other neighbourhoods there are not many examples of drop-outs in case of girls. But there too, school education is not given much value. It is like a by default rule. But there is no aspiration as such linked to school education. This is again because there is no further goal and objective through schooling. Girls study only to get good deal in marriage, sometimes studying too much may also negatively impact marriage. In Rajabazar many girls have also started working simultaneously in tailoring, weaving, leather work, post Covid.

Aspirations not always linked to formal education

Young women have different aspirations, though living in very constricted environment and full of challenges. Some of their immediate peers are in front office work, retail or hospitality industry, nursing, para-medical, pursuing beautician or dancing course. It is similar throughout whether in Kalighat, Charu Market, Kasba or in Tala. Some girls also look at reels, content creation, opening up log-in, cooking, day to day life, travel channel as ways of earning and making a career. Many people are into blogging and content creation these days.

Adolescent girls in Batighar Pathshala, Kalighat share how they love extracurricular activities more than studies. Many of them are trying to learn musical instruments like mandolin, violin. Some are learning, dance. Some are into tailoring. Some are into sports like football. Finding an outdoor space to practice is a big challenge, but they play on terrace or on the streets. Some also want to pursue higher studies.

In many cases it is also about parents not being able to provide for higher education after 12. So, it falls upon young women, how they will support themselves. Two of the interviewees who passed Higher Secondary examinations, enrolled in colleges but dropped out after a point because they didn't have money to continue and also because college experience was not good. One of them wants to start tuitions for younger kids. In-fact it comes out that many people who have passed Higher Secondary are now opting for teaching school kids. Some of their friends are sitting Govt. exams, aspiring for a career in commerce or banking. Another one had to leave college since she had to do caregiving for her mother, who became very ill and went through a major operation. It showed how girls from an early age were more responsible for parents and shared home responsibilities. In her own words,

“I left college mainly because my mother became unwell. She is my only support system. I also lost interest in studies. I started working... The behaviour of some teachers was not good in college.

Also, in case of available jobs, they only see if we have passed class 12.” (P, participant from Kasba)

P has worked in the front desk / reception of a holiday company and at back office in an AC shop. Presently she is working at another holiday company. Her salary slab is 12-13k. Some of her friends are working and most women are getting married. When asked about if she wants to marry and if there is pressure, she says there is pressure, but she does not want to marry. According to her marriage does not guarantee happiness. But it depends on the perspective of the woman. Some feel safe and secure and doesn't want to work after marriage. Some want to keep on working.

It can be seen that schooling and career aspirations are two different paths for adolescent girls from poor and marginalised communities. Since there is no guidance from home, often it is difficult to decide what one wants to become and whether studying, school plays any important role there. Here it becomes necessary to take a closer look at the patriarchal structures of home and society.

Section 6: Violent Homes, Neighbourhoods

Domestic violence and abusive father

For many children from working class background there is no care, love and support at home. Educators categorise these as broken families. They are abandoned children sometimes raised by grandparents or relatives if both parents are missing. Even when parents are there, it may be a violent family environment. Many face abuse at home by father or male members of the family. Many kids of this vulnerable section drop out in elementary school level, sometimes in classes 5-6. Mostly of these are boys and they try to find work in tea shops, distributing water bottles, loading and unloading vehicles when they get older.

There is no one at home that who asks them why they are not studying, no one supervises them or helps them to learn. Studying requires encouragement and a constant supervision which is very much lacking in such homes, as parents are enmeshed in socio-economic struggles. Parents leave in the early hours of morning and come back home late night. Tension, quarrel, violence always characterise these households. There is also no physical space to concentrate and study.

For girls especially home environment is abusive, violent and unsafe in most instances. Different examples come up from all the four community schools and also from school teachers. Violent family environment, domestic violence, abusive father and conflicts are a big deterrence for girls for not being able to study. In many instances it is the women, mothers who are raising children single handedly. In the city the pressure for marriage is not so much there. Parents, especially mothers, generally want their daughters to study and become financially independent before being in a relationship or getting married. A teacher enumerates one situation where the girl wants to pursue science in Higher Secondary but her elder brother discourages her and instructs her to pursue commerce. The simple reason is that the brother himself is pursuing CA and does not want the sister to pursue any other discipline. There is a fear and insecurity here of the girl performing well and also moving beyond the control of the family. Teachers say that this kind of patriarchal control within families is very common.

Educator from Charu Market share one example where the father is very abusive, physically violent to the mother and daughter both. The daughter slowly connects with a catering boy and wants to marry and leave. The mother is left helpless and desperately want *pathshala* people to intervene. She wants her child to be educated and earn by herself.

One incident of how domestic violence affects girl child's education is narrated by the school teacher in Sonarpur. A girl who has passed Board exams of class 10 had landed up at a shelter home because of

domestic dispute between parents. The mother was not being allowed to see her daughter at the shelter home and neither allowed to hand over a few winter clothes. The daughter was forcefully abducted from school one day to take revenge upon her mother. Even after multiple FIRs and police cases pending against him, he got bailed. The daughter was brainwashed and taken to a shelter home and now she can't come out without court order etc. The mother is frantically visiting school, also trying to legally claim the child, as she has single handedly raised and taken care of her. The school knows the mother and supports her but is also facing pressure from father. The father has been coming to the school, asking for Madhyamik documents etc. so that he can cease all those and keep the child in his custody. This is one among many such similar incidents within girl's schools, challenges that often seriously affect 'girl child' education.

Father figures have been described as abusive, alcoholic and absent in the lives of daughters in case of all the four families. From different instances it can be seen that mothers play a central role and may be also the reason why they don't want their girls to be married off early. Mothers want a secure life for their daughters, which they only foresee through school education.

Community/ neighbourhood people as moral guardians and patriarchs

More than domestic violence and abuse within family, the patriarchal control and surveillance at neighbourhood, community level is most challenging in the everyday life of girls. There are many anecdotes regarding this and it is most well explained in the magazines of the community schools – 'Chorki' magazine from Pritilatar Pathshala and Ashu Timirer Pathshala and 'Motichur' magazine from Rokeya Shikshya Kendra. How community and neighbourhood life become suffocating because of the patriarchal diktats from community people and restrictions from home comes out abundantly in the narratives by adolescent girls. Girls are under stricter surveillance in the community. They cannot go out and roam about freely and frequently as boys taunt and ridicule them. The gendered roles and divisions of work at home, domestic violence pose restrictions, which is multiplied through such surveillance and threats outside.

There was one incident in Kalighat where one girl in the *Batighar Pathshala* was subjected to frequent sibling rivalry. Later it could be understood that community people were instigating her elder sister regarding her activities and engagements with *Batighar pathshala*. Neighbourhood people were constantly surveilling her and commenting on her activities and movements.

Girls describe how the immediate public is the men's space, domain. It has always been so. But there is more surveillance at a community level and increased restrictions they face from home. As is the situation in every neighbourhood, clubs, roads, field are spaces of boys and men who play carrom, cricket, footballs. In Charu Market, this is one reason why many families do not want to send adolescent girls to *pathshalas*.

As one girl states in their bookfair magazine 'Chorki'⁴ that the biggest rule in Charu market is the differentiation between girls and boys, where boys can do everything, go anywhere, return home at late night, wear anything but if any girl wear a different dress or goes out by herself or with any friend, people will start talking. People are always blaming girls for any wrongs they face from society, instead of trying to address the patriarchal power dynamics in the neighbourhood.

Eve-teasing and masculinity of neighbourhood boys

There is one incident of a girl who committed suicide in Charu Market 2021. This is because some guy blackmailed her with intimate pictures with another guy. She was threatened that she would be exposed to her parents. The matter went viral and her father especially behaved aggressively. He denied to have food cooked by her, which finally led to her to commit suicide. This incident affected the entire dynamics of the slum.

The educator of Pritilatar Pathshala share that there are a few reasons why adolescent boys have never been part of the group. One is that the neighbourhood is fragmented. And post Covid the relationships between people have deteriorated. It is also true that the neighbourhood itself is not a safe place for girls anymore. Whenever they are out, neighbourhood boys eve-tease and harass them. Girls themselves share how the neighbourhood feel unsafe and how they cannot trust neighbours. They can only visit some scripted zones. They go out in group and play during winter. If they deviate a bit from the scripted places, maps, immediately neighbourhood people start reporting against them. But such freedom is also diminishing. Parents start humiliating their own daughters if they deviate a little bit from rules and norms.

The overall culture of the neighbourhood, socio-economic relationships between people is very important when understanding the degree of patriarchal control at home and neighbourhood levels. As in case of Charu Market, the experiences are terrible and there is violence within each home. But this is not the specific characteristics of one place. That the public belongs to boys, men and they only have claim and liberty to do anything, go anywhere, while the girl must be at home and also help in domestic chores, care responsibilities is a given equation and the accepted masculine-feminine divisions in poor families.

⁴ 'Chorki' is the Bookfair Magazine released by Pritilatar Pathshala and Ashu Timirer Pathshala, described in detail in a following section.

Section 7: Mobiles, Marriage, Romance

Drop-out in schools due to marriage or romantic relationships

Several participants point out that drop outs in villages are due to child and early marriages and in some cases trafficking. National Family Health Survey - NFHS-5 in 2019-21 indicates child or early marriage percentage remains the same in West Bengal, which is 41.6%, similar to NFHS-4 in 2015-16 (Ahamed, 22 March 2021). This static percentage of early marriage from 2015-16 to 2019-21 cannot be taken as a positive indicator as it suggests that child and early marriages continue uninterrupted, even after introduction of so many state government schemes. What has been the experiences and lived realities in the city becomes a very important question.

The city opens up a very different picture from the village, where early marriage is no more a social or familial pressure. But if young women, girls are not studying, it is taken for granted that the destination is marriage. It is an accepted and sanctioned practice by families, society and consequently girls themselves. It is irrespective of the economic situation of the family. It is a truth in the lower socio-economic strata throughout. Educators inform how, “*bhalo chele pele biye die di* / marrying off the girl if there is a good boy” sentiment is there even in the cities.

But what has been unfolding in the cities is that nowadays girls themselves opt for early marriage. And in most cases, it is underage marriage for both girls and boys. This is true in Rajabazar, Kalighat, Tala, Charu Market, Saltlake, Patuli, everywhere. More than parents, marriage is mostly initiated by the girl and happens because of the girl’s own volition. Thus, there is no question of bringing law here. Elopement is also quite common within the city. Parents want to educate girls more than boys. Some cases elaborated were, where the girl started pressurising people at home. If not marriage, some love relationship is always in the horizon.

The medium through which such romantic relationships bloom is the mobile phone. Teachers and educators narrate how girls are addicted to phones day and night. It is through the phone that most romantic pursuits and liaisons are made. Internet plays a big role. Making reels, befriending boys, knowing new people, getting into a love relationship, everything attractive happens through phone / social media. The social media especially Instagram and WhatsApp play a crucial role here. Getting involved in romantic relationships happen at a much younger age these days due to phones. From declarations of love to marriage announcements all happen on social media. It is all about social marriage. They don’t even go to temples. It can happen just under a tree. They take many photos wearing sari, sindur etc and upload it on Instagram.

There is everyone on Instagram, the entire neighbourhood, each family – children, parents everyone. And every day they upload reels. So, this is a kind of social declaration.

According to educators once married, one has reached a social status and also one gains the license to roam around, go anywhere. That is the ultimate happiness, to be roaming around freely. Not going to school becomes a natural process. Eventually they may drop out of the school entirely. Now since all these marriages are under-age marriage both from the boy and the girl's side, often they remain in their parents' household. Sometimes the girl may move to the boy's household but in many cases, they move back to parental household. In most cases the girls start regretting after a point of time. In one or two cases the marriage has been successful and are continuing. In most other cases the marriage has been a disaster.

When asked about boyfriends or romantic relationship, girls remain silent or maybe share little. Most of them have some experience to share. And it shows that many of them pursue such relationships through mobile phones. One participant from Kalighat shares,

“I have not thought of marriage yet. I had a boyfriend, not anymore... (silence)”

The educator from Batighar Pathshala in Kalighat inform that for young people, it is not important who is seeing whom? But rather what benefits do the relationship bring. There are such equations, where the girls demand money from boys for meeting in Kalighat. The boys also respond to it, because there is always this understanding that I am rescuing a girl from a poor, vulnerable family.

In case of Rokeya Shiksha Kendra, the educator says that many girls have come back to parental home and also rejoined school. But the parents have become very shaky and cannot depend on their children in such cases. Also, when they rejoin school, it is never easy to adjust because of two reasons. One is they have to make up for the time gap in studies and start anew. Second is they only get admitted in lower classes from which they left school and it is not easy to adjust socially.

Education and mobiles phones

Since phone became mandatory for school curricula and study during Covid, students are more addicted to phone for other purposes than study. That continues. Though phone is not a mandatory medium for education now, but it is still a requirement. Teachers say that there are parent teachers' WA groups, notices, instructions are sent and online meetings also held. Though teachers ask parents to keep the device away, in usual life it is not a possibility. And in many cases, it is children who are more adept with electronic devices than parents. Parents also depend on children for operating such devices. Schools now try their best to keep girls away from phones by issuing some disciplinary rules like not carrying phones to schools.

Here it must be reckoned that instead of analysing how phone or any electronic device can also play a detrimental role in case of school education, the public education system is banking on it not out of compulsion as during Covid, but also as an encouragement post Covid. The Taruner Swapno scheme launched by the West Bengal Government in 2022 is the example. The state Govt. calls it as an 'educational reform', the main objective being to facilitate the students to connect their studies with technology. Through this scheme, Rs 10,000/- will be provided as financial assistance to students to purchase Tablet/ Smartphone/ PC. Initially only Class 12 students studying in Government schools or Madrasahs of West Bengal Government were eligible to get financial assistance, but now students of Class 11 are also eligible to apply. Students whose Annual Family Income is below Rs. 2,00,000/- per year are eligible for this scheme.

Such a scheme by the state government brings to the forefront many questions around how public education is visualised and how the Govt. is completely indifferent about the various influence of electronic devices, particularly deterring study habits, more so in socio-economically poor homes with negligible resources. Also, if phones or tabs are made mandatory in school education, schools must also develop curriculum in a fashion, where such electronic devices are included in the methods of teaching. In a context, where there is no guidance at home and children are subjected to violence at home and in the public daily, in such a context phones or tabs become a medium of escaping from the offline world. As teachers and educators inform majority of children do not know how to navigate the world of internet and social media. No one buys tab as laid out in Taruner Swapno. Everyone is buying phone as it has diverse utilities within the price limit, making fake bills and submitting.

People admit that mobile phone is an addiction for the toddler to the young adult. So, whether through gaming, social media, dating apps, one can see how adolescent and young adults are more inclined towards living in the virtual world of social media. Adolescent boys are more into gaming through mobile phones. PUBG and other free and online games are addictions of many children. There has been a growing trend post Covid19 lockdown, where adolescent groups of mostly boys, sometimes one or two girls roam in the neighbourhood for free wi-fi connection so that they can play games or scroll social media. Educators inform that they are so much addicted to games that they do not come to sessions. In Sonagachi, if someone calls them, when they are playing games, the call is automatically called off or forwarded. Some boys also share that they want to earn money through games.

There are some unwritten rules in poor families. When a mobile phone enters a family, it first becomes the property of the son/brother. It is only after usage by the brother, that sister will get access to it. Teachers report fights within homes between siblings for using the one and only mobile phone that the family bought during or post Covid. Sometimes the kids get connected to kids in other cities like Bombay or Delhi who

advise them to leave schools and lure them to migrate to the other city. The kid in Kolkata do not think much about his own family, expenditure, living costs in another city and can easily get lured. Boys desperately want to get into work, because they think that the only way to lead a better life is with phone and internet and that is only possible if they work. They can only buy a phone and keep recharging it, only if they work.

It is also to be observed here that with the introduction of phone and the virtual digital and social world, new information and technology is also creating less and less attachment to home, parents, siblings. This is also possible because the home environment does not lead to a sense of security, give birth to new aspirations. There is a lot of grievance, frustration that keep accumulating in young boys and girls where phone becomes a medium to escape misery, hunger, pain, violence, humiliation. They do not and cannot think much about their parents, siblings, family members. A teacher shared that adolescent boys have become so desperate that it leads to even physical violence at home,

“Phone is the reason why a group of boys have left studies. They beat up their mother, cannot beat father. They behave crassly with mother if they are not given mobiles. They beat up sisters too. It’s terrible!” (S, teacher from north Kolkata school)

When someone falls behind in studies, the cycle only moves backward. There is no motivation or effort to study at all. And all energy and motivation find other distractions. Even when there is no pass-fail, that is not also motivating them to go to school. Schools do not attract the labouring class children. A girl from Kalighat shares,

“When my break up happened, I used to play a game. It was only because of that game that I could forget everything. That I could forget that relationship. That game is called FreeFire. It is an addiction.” (I, DIKSHA, Kalighat)

Discussing about how mobile phones have become a menace in itself, an educator reflects,

“In villages when we used to play, we called our peers and as gang used to steal mangoes, fruits from people’s homes. Also play the marble game. Now even after calling youngsters don’t respond. Everyone, even the young in villages are busy in their phones.” (S, Sanghati School)

The virtual world becomes the dream destination for many, promising things that are difficult to access in the offline world. In such an environment, phones and tabs do not remain only as mediums of learning, education, but are the medium of connections, network building, romantic relationships, fake encounter, misinformation, being trafficked, earning money, social media fame, capital and escape into the fantasy world. So much so, that teachers complain how smartphones have become the mediums through which girls

are now joining escort services in the city. It is the want, aspiration to lead an extravagant life, to be different from what their parents are that also lead girls to put themselves out there. Teachers inform that the Govt. is conducting training on HIV/AIDS and safe sex, which shows that Govt. is very aware about the sexual explorations and also income generation by young girls. Incidents of carrying condoms in bags, creating social media contents and reels about personal life etc. are becoming common.

The educators from Roshni (working with adolescent and young women in Rajabazar) narrate many instances where Muslim women are misguided and misinformed to a great extent. Parents don't know what is happening through phone. In case of adolescent girls, they cannot dissociate how much and what information to put on social media and what to keep away. They want to explore sexuality and social media becomes an open avenue for that. There is so much mis-information and fake news, IDs profiles in social media, which one is genuine, correct they don't know. It can't be verified also. It leads to contacts with strangers and women are led to human trafficking without any knowledge. In our community men from other countries keep targeting women, even married women. Even girls get interested and pulled into such traps. This network of unidentified people is there in the entire community.

How to handle the situation?

As teachers and educators reflect, it is not possible to reverse the situation, where there will be no mobile phones in our lives. So there has to be some other mechanism by which this situation needs to be challenged. According to one educator,

“Dealing with so much data in the online world, children are of course overwhelmed. They do not understand red flags. But also, this process cannot be reversed. When the mobile phone has entered it will remain. All of us are exposed to this today.” (K, Rokeya Shikshya Kendra)

The difference between an adolescent child from a slum and a middle-class family is probably that the latter, though exposed to a lot of information and also engages in everything that is considered risky. They engage in romantic pursuits, sex, sexual explorations, think about gender-sexual identity etc. but the middle-class child will never opt for marriage, simply because they feel protected and sheltered in their natal family, household. There is a sense of shelter and home for the middle-class child, there is a lot of love, care, friendships with or and beyond parents generally which is difficult to push away. It is a different world for the adolescent youth in the slum, where promise of a different life away from the drudgery, violence, abuse, neglect is found in social media. There is no promise of shelter in the existing home that one has to give away. Thus, mobile phone becomes the pathway for the fantasy world, a better living option which is not attainable in the real physical world.

One way to tackle this situation is to talk about the varied challenges that urban youth from labouring classes face in their day to day living. It is probably by thinking of how to include a sex education curriculum in the Govt. schools that one can initiate opening a space for dialogue. Creating the space to talk about sex, sexuality, attractions, romance can actually help in addressing some of the misadventures with mobile phones. About what one should become serious and what should be a casual engagement, there must be adequate discussion regarding that. There should also be trainings of how to navigate the internet world, how to access information, from where. The world of the internet included social media and the wonders it brings, need to be a guided tour. It is also required to show how the virtual world also spread fake news, information and thus the different promises may be interesting but are seldom real. Such information about internet, what one can access and pursue through internet, the different attractions and dangers of social media, probably need to be part of school curriculum and pedagogy.

Section 8: Factors Unsettling the Public-School Education System

Teachers from Govt. schools complain how the school system itself has been malfunctioning due to less financial investment leading to dilapidated physical and learning infrastructures. Constant shifting of rules, regulations, schemes do not take account of ground situations. The focus of the Government being only in numbers – how many students are enrolled, retained, passed, instead of whether students are able to learn, adapt to school curriculum, environment post Covid have alienated students and have been widening the gap between teachers, teaching infrastructure, school curriculum and the harsh, changed lived realities of students. Some of the factors ailing Govt. schools are as follows.

Crisis of teachers and teaching

Every Govt. school is struggling with teacher strength, capacity. There is no recruitment of new teachers to an extent that certain subjects do not have any teachers at all. Teachers of other subjects teach remaining subjects on an ad-hoc basis. Teachers are all in agreement that without recruitments of teachers and non-teaching staff, it is impossible to sustain the public-school education system. They share the crisis facing most Govt. school is inadequate human resource and dilapidating infrastructure. While a Govt. school premise is used for various exercise – holding examinations, elections, Govt. programs etc. the necessary financial investment in terms of resources, human power and money is lacking. Whether it is a suburban / village school or city school, investment in school education has been decreasing over the years.

Whenever any school is struggling with number of students and teachers there is no initiative in supporting the establishment, instead there is a push to close it down. For closing down a school, existing teachers are transferred to other schools. Such actions are weakening the public-school education system more. However, this staggering situation of Govt. schools is increasing at a faster scale post Covid in the city.

The teacher recruitment system has become centralized, which means jobs are transferrable. It is only when such systems are de-centralised, that is teachers are from local regions, that one can hope for a sense of ownership and responsibility towards the school. If the teacher is from Kolkata and she is given posting in the Sunderbans, it generally takes a while to adapt and people may not be able to adapt also. In many cases Govt. school teachers have no connection with the ground, the marginalised communities they teach. Thus, it is somewhere the system, where recruitment, transfers, retirement and post-retirement clauses have become uncertain, arbitrary and managed through the central system, that is creating a burden and pressure on teachers.

One prevailing issue has been difference in class-caste locations between school teachers and the students, which has been discussed in previous sections. The current school system is not only maintaining but widening such socio-economical locational difference between students and teachers. Since school teachers are being transferred frequently, there is no scope for children to build any neighbourhood or local connections with teachers. Because the ‘Sir’ or ‘Didimoni’ is not from the locality, neighbourhood or even the region in many cases. So, there are language and cultural barriers along with caste-class barriers that is creating a problem in many schools. Also, children who are increasingly accessing public schooling are from more and more vulnerable and oppressed strata of society. It is children of homeless people, daily wage labourers who are dependent on public education system. Along with these, as discussed in the 4th chapter, Covid timeline have already disrupted teacher-student relationships. In these contexts, it only falls on teachers to make extra effort to make changes in the immediate environment of schools.

Privatisation of the school education

One of the cross-cutting phenomena that came out from interviews is the growing practice of enrolling children in low-cost or low-fee private schools. It is not only that children of affluent parents are going to DPS or BD Memorial and getting some high-end education. The notion today being how smart and educated the child is and English being the language of interaction, commerce, business, any trade, more and more people from marginalized communities and labouring classes have been opting for private English medium schools. As participants share, these schools have become increasingly popular in the city, outskirts, and the districts. They promise attractive infrastructure and above all teaching in English medium. English speaking ability is the currency for social status as much as the promise that it will lead to better job opportunities. As one school teacher comments, the pass-out students from Govt. schools who belong to the same marginalised class-caste category, given the opportunity will admit their children in a KIDZEE pre-primary school than a Govt. school. It is not that teachers are not good in Govt. schools. In-fact in most cases teachers are more qualified and better equipped in Govt. schools. Questions remain that why and how this shift to low-fee private English medium schools.

Scholars have pointed out how the emergence of ‘budget’ / ‘low-cost’ / ‘low-fee’ private schools are a trend post 2000s in India that have serious implications for right to education (Nambissan 2012, 2020). ‘Budget’ schools are cost-effective as they pay low salaries to teachers, enable to hire more teachers and maintain lower people-teacher-ratio and charge lower fees, which is affordable for some sections of the urban poor. Preference for ‘low-cost’ schools against Govt. schools is a ‘universal preference’ both in cities and villages (Nambissan 2012, 2020). Also, these schools are conveniently located within poor settlements and thus more accessible to girls. In a recent article, Indrani Sengupta points out that the choice of private schools over Govt. schools is determined by many factors and private English medium education is fetishized across

different classes (Sengupta 2019). Drawing from the urban fringes of West Bengal – Maslandapur and Madhyamgram of North 24 Parganas, the study demarcates that while middle class people are able to make informed choice about schools and their children find ways into quality education in branded private schools, the reach of the lower income classes are limited to ‘low-cost’ private schools that most of the time do not offer quality education. Thus, the social inequality most of the time remains same, even after sending children to private English medium schools. What is interesting in all these studies is that how it is not always economic factor but more a cultural, social and psychological aspirations that guide the choice of schools for parents from whether from middle or labouring classes.

This reveals that what is perceived as education or the value system of education and aspirations have been shifting drastically in neo-liberal times. The aspirations and aim of the urban labouring classes are somewhere directed at skill-based education. This is also an aspiration that is manufactured through the education and job market. The job market is also demanding vocational skills, knowledges. Education today is not about creating interest in language, concepts, building curiosity, instilling values. It is more about learning some techniques, skills. The low-cost private schools are also teaching a certain kind of life-style and aspirations, goals. It is the entire market and business of school education that needs analysis here. According to an educator in the high-end English schools, the relationship between students and teachers have become that of clients and service providers, where students can sue teachers for anything. This business model of schools is becoming the core of the education system. And along with this there are many gaps, where corruption is easily gaining ground through ‘ghost schools’ or ‘shell schools’ where people enroll but there are no classes. According to one educator, ‘ghost schools’ are only for being registered. Students who enroll actually depend on Akash and Pathfinder for classes and are preparing for Joint Entrance and NEET exams.

Thus, what is most striking today, is the engulfing of the education market by private players. According to Nalini Juneja, privately managed schools which nationally constitute 23 percent of all schools in India, constitute over 63% of all schools in urban areas and accommodate over 70% of enrolment (Juneja 2022). Govt schools are fewer in number than fee charging private schools, despite 26.4% of urban population are living below poverty lines. She ascribes this to the increasing ‘economic differentiation, linguistic dichotomisation, and segregation among schooling opportunities’ (Juneja 2022). As cities are growing and becoming more segregated, same is happening to schools, where more and more ‘budget’ schools are launched in different urban sites, both the urban centres, congested areas and peripheries of the city. In this thriving and swift inclination towards privatisation of the school system and the rapidly growing private-public partnership model of education, the promises and visions of the RTE Act stands contradictory and probably requires some reflection.

Challenges in exercising right to education – RTE Act, 2009

- a) As teachers and educators suggest, there need to be some modifications and critical evaluation of the RTE Act. There is probably a requirement to extend the provisions of free education till class 12. According to many teachers the sudden changes in rules and regulations from class 9 discourages and demotivates students to pursue study. Till class 8 one gets mid-day meal, free uniform, school stationaries, accessories, education is free and there is no exam. From class 9 it is not only that there is exam, but suddenly there is a financial pressure. One has to buy everything, pay tuition fees and there is no mid-day meal. Such a huge change, when one is accustomed to a certain kind of school life is difficult. Educators say how children are scared of graduating to class 9. It is a big fear that everything will change. The sudden differentiation of no mid-day meal, school accessories are at some level quite discriminatory for siblings, peers when one graduate to class 9 and the other is in class 7, 8. It creates a barrier between class 1 to 8 and class 9 to 12. Teachers and educators suggest that mid-day meals and free uniform, school accessories, books should be available and school fees exempted till higher secondary or at least till secondary level.
- b) Educators in *pathshala* stress how Govt. school education starts only from 6 years of age. But pre-school is important, especially for first generation learners coming from poor, resourceless families, who do not have that home environment where one can learn about language and history through stories shared by elders from childhood. For children belonging to dominant caste-class families or at least where parents are educated, being in a culture of constant learning, constant proximity to books, songs, stories, artworks create an environment of care, nurture and learning. One learns very fast, language and pronunciation becomes easier. It is not same for children going to Govt. schools. And it is here that pre-school is important. According to teachers the ICDS system has not been adequately addressing learning gap in these years.
- c) Previously there were some methods of evaluation instituted to understand the progress of children in each class. But such methods are not mandatory and sadly not followed by many schools. In this context, teachers suggest the need to make the Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) system, part of the RTE Act, functional and mandatory in schools. This evaluation system with such regularity was introduced with the rule that there will not be any pass/fail till class 8. It was done so that every child is cared and supported within school and there is a method to track their progress regularly. But these internal evaluation systems have not been followed, which has resulted to massive deterioration of learning outcomes.
- d) Attendance not being compulsory in school is a big issue. Till class 8 there is no formal attendance. From class 9, though formally there is written rule for 75% attendance, but students don't bother to come to schools. This is also because they know even if they bunk classes, they can appear for

exams. Teachers share that under the current system, they cannot pressurise students, but have to comply to their whims and tactics. They are also pressurised by authorities to show how many students they can bring for class and ultimately pass through the exams.

“Unless someone submits an entire blank copy, we always have to see how one can pass a student, regardless of even if they have not attempted all questions or have written a poor exam.” (S, Teacher, Saltlake)

In such a scenario, whether students have written, submitted projects or not do not matter. It is the teachers’ responsibility to see that projects are completed and people are securing marks in the examinations, because every school is under pressure to show how many students are passing out each year.

- e) Doing away with exams till class 8 have only negatively impacted students. All school teachers and educators of pathshalas agree that doing away with exams till class 8 is not making it easier for more and more children to study. It is increasingly de-motivating children. This is because children are psychologically prepared now and do not bother to study or attend classes. It is de-motivating because a child who is trying to study and doing well in exams is being promoted with a fellow student who is not giving any effort. Here, it becomes easier to slip into the mode of not studying at all, unless there are very specific systems of care and nurture at school or/ and at home. In most cases, children just don’t bother to study and in classes 9 and 10 people have to learn from the scratch. They don’t even know sentence constructions, very basics of maths, writing, reading etc. There is a trend now, where most students study only before exams of class 9 and 10. Before that there is no preparation that they take. It shows how education has become very goal oriented, it is only about passing exams. There is fear, indifference and lot of reluctance to study, more in the adolescent years.

Vocationalisation of school education

Teachers express dismay at the current National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, that recommends vocational education from class 6 onwards.

‘The policy recommends introduction to vocational education from Grade 6 onwards to provide access to all students, high quality vocational education necessary to enable them to acquire necessary skills for further education and training and a clear recognised pathways to employment. The vocationalisation of education will be expanded in all the Govt. and Govt. aided schools through Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan’ (NCERT 2020).

Introducing skill training from class 6 onwards aims at changing the entire model of school curriculum. This is a very calculated move through NEP 2020, where the public appeal is of creating more job opportunities for the marginalised class-caste communities. In an economy where there is more and more crisis of jobs and more people are shifting to private and informal sector, there is more acceptability of skill-based education. When it starts from school level, majority public will be drawn towards it in the hope of being employed post school education. People who come from marginalised class-caste, religious locations, who cannot relate to the present school and study system, respond positively to new promises of NEP. For them it is alluring to get free vocational education with which they will be more competent for the job market. Though it has not been implemented yet, teachers and educators state that this is a polished way of formally inviting more and more people in labour intensive, skill-based work that only helps in creating new forms of cheap labour.

People already employed in the informal economy faces the precarity of work and is ready to change their jobs often. Even the NEP recommends and deliberates that there is no requirement to deepen knowledge in one field. The diversifying motive of NEP, where higher education should aim at being ‘multidisciplinary’ and stress on skill based / vocational education is something that hints the vision for public schooling and higher education. Skill based education also means people will remain restrained to certain kinds of employment and a set salary. While vocational training is needed but is there need to introduce it at school level? Is not school education till class 12 a basic requirement for reading, writing, comprehension skills, knowledge, to instill curiosity and also embed a basic value system in students?

From field level interaction it can be seen that women who have passed higher secondary, are working in malls, receptions, travel agencies, shops have a basic bargaining skill. Some of them have tried going to college, is in college or have left colleges. As discussed in Chapter 4, two interviewees in the study are college drop outs. One is preparing to create a tuition base for herself and her peers. Another works in a travel agency. Educators reflect that though the job market is shrinking, the value of basic school education, especially, reading, writing, comprehension abilities is that it helps to grow, understand the world and deal with it better. The way one negotiates or bargains in a workplace, with employers, manager or at home when one is 16/17 years old changes drastically when they are 21/22 years. Skill education as envisaged through NEP, if changes the school curriculum entirely will definitely affect the psychological, social and imaginary growth of children. Afterall, the current school curriculum has evolved through many stages of revision, changes, through insights and suggestions by many educators, policy level practitioners. Instead of bringing changes in such a curriculum that invokes curiosity, earnestness in learning, thinking processes, when the drive is to vocationalise school education, it only shows how there is fundamental shift in the approach and aims of public-school education today.

Section 9: Role of Community Schools / *Pathshalas*

Community / Alternate schools that emerged in Kolkata during Covid pandemic

- a) *Ashu Timirer Pathshala* in Jadavpur University
- b) *Batighar Pathshala* in Kalighat
- c) *Bhagat Singh Pathshala* in Jadavpur
- d) *Pritilatar Pathshala* in Charu Market
- e) *Rokey Shiksha Kendra* in Patuli
- f) *Sanghati School* in Salt Lake, Tala, Gariahat

Objectives

While all *pathshalas* or community schools in this research have been driven by different political perspectives and organisations, there are quite a few similarities in their vision, aim, methods and character. It is important to see that all these *pathshalas* started during Covid and mostly from relief initiatives started by students, activists, social workers in different areas. For example, Rokeya Shiksha Kendra started from the network Humans of Patuli, which was a citizen's initiative during Covid mostly to meet health crisis and gathering food resources distribution and relief. *Pritilatar Pathshala* in Charu Market started from Jadavpur Commune, a JU student-based initiative that catered to many bastis and homeless people in Jadavpur, Dhakuria, Gariahat, Charu Market. Likewise, *Sanghati* school was started by some left oriented organisations and student initiatives. *Batighar Pathshala* was started during Covid with the initiative of few social workers.

The objective-vision of the *pathshalas* here become important. They aim at meaningful and value education which is not limited to textbooks and formal education methods. They are driven by a political vision, where the aim from the beginning is to create a space where children can relate to what is being taught. The children's lives here become important. Their struggle, the violence and discrimination they face and witness becomes part and parcel of the education. Their daily struggle is recognised. The violence and abuse they face at home, in society are recognised and find articulation through learning activities. The aim is also to impart a kind of political education, where certain values, principles can be cultivated, where awareness, knowledge about socio-economic inequalities is sharpened.

Methods of teaching

The pedagogy of community schools being very different from Govt. schools, students are easily attracted. It is fun, activity oriented and meaningful learning. While texts and syllabus are part of it, but it is more

about self, environment, people, community. It is about learning to safeguard oneself and others. It is about friendships, bonding and relating with the outside world.

The method here is probably the most crucial. People are more emotionally invested. Care, warmth, sensitivity have been the praxis of education in the *pathshalas*. As recounted in Chapter 4, there is a lot of neglect and even humiliation that particularly children from labouring classes face in school. As many school teachers themselves inform these children are not motivated to study because they do not get enough care and supervision in school.

“Oder bhalobashar songe porano hoyna./ They are not taught with love and care.” (S, teacher from north Kolkata)

In contrast, in the *pathshalas*, they teach in a fashion, where as one educator says, it is like teaching one’s own children. Effort is given to make studies fun and interesting. In *Sanghati* school they take children out for small tours to learn about environment, plants, animals. Other *pathshalas* too have been doing excursions to the Bookfair, to the zoo, to bird watching and engage in recreational and sport activities.

Another important aspect is teaching basic language and mathematics. These children are not oriented to reading, writing skills at home. They come from families where work is defined through manual labour only. Their parents and grandparents have all been in manual labour. So, they can speak at length and are vocal about everything. But reading, writing practice are exercises where they need special attention.

As one educator shares, the problem is that they fear new books. They always ask seniors to teach them how to read. This has been also my experience, the little time I have spent with children in some *pathshalas*. The interest in books can only be cultivated when there is no fear. And that is only possible with a culture of reading and writing, which does not happen in schools. Many of these *pathshalas* have created a library system, from where children can borrow books. Some like Rokeya Shiksha Kendra have ‘language remedial class’ where special attention is given to reading, pronunciation, speed, understanding meaning’s etc. Along with this, the other practice is to make them write and write anything and everything. The newsletters brought out by some *pathshalas* – ‘Chorki’ by *Pritiltar Pathshala* and *Ashu Timirer Pathshala*; and ‘Motichur’ from *Rokeya Shiksha Kendra* here becomes important.

Exposure to theatre, arts, dance and singing

Apart from school curriculum, a lot of emphasis is given to music, art, dance and theatre interests of children. This is also done with the understanding that children learn faster through physical activities, more through body and oral memory exercises. In *Batighar Pathshala* there are separate music, dance and theatre classes for children. Rokeya Shiksha Kendra also does recitation classes. Singing and dancing have been

instituted through external teachers in most *pathshalas*. These also expose the children to a different world, with which they are not familiar.

“From day 1 we started doing drawing, music, dance along with studies. There was a separate Library class for children. We started introducing them to story books. So that they find interest in reading and writing. They have rarely been introduced to different kinds of books. Thus, it became difficult to form relationship with books. They were never gifted books. That is where we came with the concept of the library, where children can access books. After Covid restrictions were withdrawn, we started a theatre group. There are now 3 theatre groups. We call them ‘mejo’, ‘sejo’ and ‘choto’ group. There is no ‘baro’ group, because no one grows up or wants to grow up (Laughs).” (Educator at *Rokeya Shiksha Kendra*)

The three theatre groups are for children of different class and age groups, so that they can take part in as many numbers as they want. The three theatre groups are divided according to classes – 5 and 6, 7 and 8, 9 to 2nd year of college. It is the young adults of 1st and 2nd year of college who are taking up responsibilities and are active members of the community school.

Creating a sense of equality, freedom, safety, ownership

The constant effort is to bridge the socio-economic and cultural gap between the privileged caste-class locations of the educators and the oppressed caste-class locations of the children. For example, the educators have consciously tried to create an environment, where there is less hierarchy and sense of power. They make it a rule that the children refer to the educators as elder siblings than call them Ma’am or Sir, unless the person concerned is a very senior person. This is similar across all the *pathshalas*.

The informality of the *pathshalas* is not an informality by default. It is for creating a space, where children feel safe enough to express themselves. Rules and regulations are made and customised in a manner, that suit the lives and routines of these children. It can be observed that children are very happy in the *pathshalas*. It gives them a sense of freedom, safe space and also a sense of ownership. The sense of ownership comes from the feeling of safety and being nourished, cared for.

It must be remembered here that *pathshalas* are also the space for socialising, creating friendships and fraternity. Kids who do not want to go to school definitely come to *pathshalas* as it provides this opportunity to socialise among neighbourhood peers and also with educators who are oftentimes not from the neighbourhood. Community schools are a space through which they relate to each other positively instead of throwing remarks, stigma, malice. Girls especially and little boys, who are mostly restricted to home and schools, use this space to express themselves without inhibitions and also share secrets, vulnerabilities,

crisis. Educators shared that even people belonging to non-normative gender-sexual orientations also found this space free and equal enough to share their secrets. It is an overall supportive, equal structure of the *pathshalas*, with a lot of care, empathy and responsibility towards children, that can create such a nurturing space.

Community schools work in such regularity and sometimes physical proximity between educators and slum children that the educators are also involved in any crisis that befalls the children or their families. It was during the critical times of Covid that these schools came into being. So, the relationship between the educators and the children are not only through mediums of learning but extends much beyond that. These are deep, intimate friendships, a feeling of fraternity, mutual dependence that is shared from both sides. Educators themselves share that they also depend on the neighbourhood boys and girls during many situations of crisis, emergency and thus it is a mutual bond of trust, care and friendship.

Difficulty in sustaining *pathshalas* / community schools

Most of the *pathshalas* starting as a voluntary initiative are facing serious fund, resource and human crisis. Till Covid period it was a different routine and people could give more time. Post Covid it is a different situation where gradually voluntary time commitment has become difficult. Also fund sources have been drying up. Except for Rokeya Shiksha Kendra in most cases, the *pathshalas* are run by a few individuals, students and activists who are trying to keep it functional through occasional donations.

Rokeya Shiksha Kendra is probably the most organised among the four *pathshalas* visited. They have quite a big team of people who are involved in teaching and training and thus there is no crisis in terms of human resource. There is also no fund crisis in the present as there is a regular system of donation. But there is accommodation crisis, as they have to vacate the rented place soon. So, there is a shelter crisis currently, which is big, because the present place has been partitioned and arranged in a manner where it is easier to take different classes. Also, people have become familiar with the house and has made it a place of their own. There are also three women from the community, who are employed in this *pathshala* to look after children and for cooking and cleaning work.

Another challenge regularly faced by *pathshalas* are neighbourhood people trying to hinder and interrupt *pathshala* activities. This is common in all *pathshalas*. When the school is in a middle-class neighbourhood, some neighbours cannot tolerate such teaching-learning processes which is different with a lot of activities and many children participating. For middle-class residents, it is a trouble and also a class-caste conflict. Poor children doing theatre, art, songs are not taken well by middle class residents. Middle class residents are okay with charity work, philanthropic initiatives but social engagement, children going out for excursions, theatre, doing research etc. are not well taken. On the other hand, if the school is located within

the slum community, then there is often a sense of competition from neighbours. Especially these are men who try to show their power and dominance in the neighbourhood.

“In Charu Market... mainly men don’t approve of it. They play cards, music in loud volume. It has become normalised. They don’t come directly and interrupt, but this has been the environment. People are very indifferent. We have got more support from the women folks and their daughters. And the families with whom we have been able to establish relationships, they are supportive.” (A, Educator, *Pritilatar Pathshala*)

Party men and others who do not care about studies, feel threatened, enraged when children and adolescent girls, young women associate with a group for studying and recreational activities. Sometimes these are also families who are suspicious of the activities and do not send their children to the community schools.

In certain communities / neighbourhoods there is also a different kind of politics created through competition between organisations working in the same neighbourhood. In case of Kalighat the presence of too many NGOs in the same area working with sex workers or their children leads to conflicts of interests. Such a situation is very detrimental for the girls, who are tied up with one organisation or collective. So, people affiliated to any one organisation or collective become the target of other organisations.

Are the Pathshalas connected?

The *pathshalas* know about each other’s existence and similar work. However there hasn’t been many collaborations between them. There was one occasion where sports were organised by *Pritilatar Pathshala* and *Ashu Timirer Pathshala*. It was a football match. There has been one annual program event organised by *Rokeya Shiksha Kendra*, *Pritilatar Pathshala* and *Sanghati School*, where they screened film and one play was performed by children. Such collaborative initiatives also bring children from different neighbourhoods together and create the opportunity for social interaction, mingling.

Section 10: In Lieu of a Conclusion

From the above findings and analysis, corroborating quantitative with qualitative data, it can be seen there are many complexities and challenges facing the public-school education system leading to school drop-outs, which have heightened in the recent years. The socio-economic paralysis during Covid, closing down of the schools and complete dependence on digital interface have unsettled the nature of Govt. school education. Research studies particularly focused on the impact of closure of schools and initiation of online education during Covid shows how there has been significant ‘gap in learning’ that online classes should only be exercised in unavoidable circumstance, as ‘face-to-face learning is the most preferred form of learning’ (ISST 2022). An education system that is struggling with less investment in terms of money, pedagogical training of teachers, learning and physical infrastructures got more shaken with the shifts during Covid.

The findings direct us to the lived realities of youth where the meaning, needs and aspiration for education, being schooled is changing rapidly. Education system is not able to de-stabilise existing societal hierarchies. This becomes most evident in case of girl student drop-outs. In case of girls, the patriarchal violence and discrimination at home, in neighbourhood and generally in society dictating her mobility, choice and restricting autonomy has been a psychological, social and physical challenge in pursuing aspirations. How much the present school education is able to address the patriarchal control and violence in the everyday lives of girls becomes the most important question here. Inclination and attachment to a phone device is the psychological and emotional alternative in a societal set-up where patriarchal violence and discrimination has become normalized and internalized to a great extent. Romantic and friendship choices and aspirations harboured are often escape routes from patriarchal diktats. School is not able to be the support system and play the crucial role in alleviating the patriarchal violence, domination, conflicts, discrimination that girl students from marginalized communities experience in everyday life. In-fact in some cases school environments are also imitating similar patriarchal control and bias towards young women.

The findings simultaneously comment on the general situation of public schools - fund crunch; crisis in teacher recruitment, management, transfer; centralization of administrative, financial decision making. The structural challenges in the public-school education system are also compounded hugely by the privatization of education since 2000s. It leads to the question of whether education will remain public at all? The publicness of public education, the principles, moto and vision of RTE Act becomes a question here. Questions like, “To what extent do educational policies enable or enervate school teachers to improve children’s learning, to improve the quality of their training and teaching? To what extent can city or state-

run schools address concerns of justice, equity and quality of education?” (Manabi Majumdar, 2017: 319) become central here. Are Right to Education (RTE) Act and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) able to address these questions? Though conceptualized to universalize and make education free and inclusive, how much the RTE Act is able to do so, needs to be attended.

Among the several lapses and discrepancies in the provisions of the RTE Act as deliberated in section 8, school teachers also share about negligence in case of mid-day meal schemes. Many a time ration itself is of very low quality and respective schools have to send feedback and apply for new ration which takes time. In the interim period, the school need to arrange for ration. This only happens in certain schools which are running well. In rare but significant cases, sometimes school administration or teachers are responsible for theft from mid-day meal provisions. In most other schools there is no inspection from administration and no extra care taken to ensure that quality nourishment reaches children. This demands immediate inspection in the mid-day meal administration.

Teachers point out that inspection of schools is very necessary in every sphere. There needs to be inspection and proper re-instatement for internal evaluation systems like Continuing and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) as mentioned before. Children have been falling behind in basic reading, writing, mathematics, comprehension abilities. The major hurdles faced is language. Some teachers also recommended only language and mathematics training till 10 years and then introducing other subjects. But whatever be the number of subjects, here frequent inspection of schools for every level and internal evaluation are necessary when there are no formal exams till class 8. Inspection is also required to estimate lack of very basic school infrastructures like toilets, drinking water facility, electricity etc. There needs to be thorough inspection and survey regarding such conditions in schools.

But even after analysing and discussing RTE Act, the only policy ensuring right to schooling, there is a larger question and that is, whether the public education system is able to create curiosity, creativity and an imploring attitude. That Govt. schools are totally inefficient and unable to keep pace and change with the changing socio-economic realities in the lives of children from labouring classes is clear from the findings and analysis. One big manifestation of this, is in school drop-outs. Students are not going to schools because they do not find any meaning in studies. Here, the question arise, does school curriculum, syllabus need revision? How can one make teaching-learning process a learner centric experience? Curriculum probably needs to be designed in a way that becomes relatable and applicable to the immediate worlds and lives of particularly labouring class children. Here it is required to discuss two aspects of changing social realities. One is digitalization of our social world and digitalization of education. Another is romantic connections established through mobile phones, leading to marriage and other possibilities – something that has been pre-determining the course of ‘girl children’.

It can be seen that mobile phones and electronic devices play very crucial roles in the social, psychological and imaginative world of children. Just introducing mobile phones as electronic device is not working. Schools probably need to create infrastructures where students can access computer and learn. Basic computer training from primary levels needs to be instituted in schools. Also, there is need for digital literacy and learning. The different usefulness and attractions of internet needs to be introduced and practiced so that all attention does not only get limited to social media. Since digital world has become a compulsory phenomenon in education, social and communication world, there needs to be separate training of teachers too. There needs to be workshops for students separately that teach them to manage and navigate the digital world from primary level.

Along with digital literacy and education, another simultaneous area where there needs to be separate attention is probably sex and gender education in schools. Scholars have reiterated that it is because of ‘pervasive discrimination’ at all institution sites, ‘starting with family, with unequal access to resources’, a ‘high load on care and domestic responsibilities and precarity with regard to access and retention in schools’ that are the structural barrier for girls from marginalised communities – Dalits, Muslim, Adivasis (Manjrekar 2021). From various discussions it can be seen that there needs to be separate sets of workshops/ classes/ curriculum which addresses the different questions around body, sex, gender, social world, where children are able to identify discrimination, abuse, violence. It has become extremely necessary in the rapidly changing world where structural oppressions are deepening and gender-sexual violence is becoming an everyday reality.

That teachers in many schools are not able to provide the care and supervision needed, do not remain as individual failures, but is very much a structural issue in the school education system. The environment at home not being conducive for studying, there is more care and supervision required from teachers in schools. Who is accountable for the systematic pressure of producing and maintaining numbers of children in schools? The diminishing number of teachers, arbitrary transfer of teachers, the centrally administered system of recruitment, management, transfer are structural shifts which affect the autonomy, freedom and motivation to teach and invest in pedagogical exercises. The recent SC judgement cancelling the recruitment of than 25000 teaching and non-teaching staff in West Bengal schools who were recruited in 2016, comment very much on the deplorable conditions of teaching environment, recruitment policies and the lack of protection, support of teachers and teaching infrastructures (Ananthakrishnan April 4 2025).

The decaying of public-school structure as pointed out by many scholars started in the 1990s with neo-liberalisation of economy and birth of privatization of school education, PPP partnerships, withholding the vision of education as ‘socially transformative’ (Majumder 2017, Manjrekar 2021). Quantitative parameters of individual students, school performances became indicators of excellence for public school education

system. Such rapid changes in the educational economy of Indian cities are very much connected to neoliberal influence of city making. This becomes more and more evident in the popularity of low-cost private schools. As shown in section 8, though private market captures the educational aspirations of the labouring class and marginalised communities, it can be seen that private school curriculum is also not able to meet the socio-economic needs and aspirations of the urban poor.

The social and materials conditions of children's 'gendered lives' stopped becoming important and the ability to question gender stereotypes and question 'gender regimes' (Manjrekar 2021) were also not encouraged in these shifts from public to privatization of school economy. Thus, while financial welfare measures like Kanyashree have supported retention of girl children in schools, it does not translate into 'gender equity goals' and build on desires of young people and girls for more meaningful education (Sudarshan 2016). Here one needs to stop and see how the 'girl child' trope has remained a developmental category for welfare measures and dictums of empowerment without bringing much social transformation. They are helping in school retention and also college retention to some extent, but have not brought any meaningful changes to school education system. It is probably a complete overhauling of school infrastructure, learning methods, digital training, workshops and capacity building for teachers, implementation of RTE Act and extension to secondary and higher secondary levels and prioritization of public education, that can probably overturn the gendered access, discrimination and create a support for not only girl children but adolescents and youth in schools. It is probably through such re-structuring that social transformation of gender equity, social equity, stopping school-drop-outs can probably be achieved.

Select Bibliography

Achuthan, Asha. "Looking for the Lesbian: some notes for a lesbian feminist politics in the time of the girl child." In *Lesbian feminism: Essays opposing Global Hetero-patriarchies* edited by Niharika Banerjea and Kath Brown. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019.

Ahamed, Sabir. "Bengal's Child Brides", *The Telegraph Online*. 22 March 2021.

Ananthakrishnan, G. "Tainted beyond Resolution': Backing HC, SC cancels appointments of over 25000 teachers, staffers in Bengal." *The Indian Express*. (April 4 2025).

<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/supreme-court-calcutta-high-court-cancelling-appointment-teaching-staff-9921852/>

Ahamed, Sabir. "Bengal's Child Brides", *The Telegraph Online*. 22 March 2021.

Bagchi, Debarati. "National Education Policy 2020: A Discussion on Educational Policy Reform in India, 14 October 2020," *German Historical Research Institute London Blog*. December 17, 2020. Retrieved March 21, 2025 from <https://ghil.hypotheses.org/244>.

Bagchi, K. Amiya. "Failure of Education Policies in West Bengal, since 1951: An Analysis," *Studies in People's History* 4, no. 2 (2017): 223-237.

Balagopal, Sarada and Ramya Subrahmanian. "Dalit and Adivasi Children in Schools: Some Preliminary Research Themes and Findings," *IDS Bulletin* 34, no. 1 (2003): 43-54.

Bandyopadhyay et al. "Assessment of Kanyashree Prakalpa." Report edited by Manabi Majumdar, Kumar Rana, Dilip Ghosh, Ashokendu Sengupta and Sabir Ahmed. Pratichi Institute in association with Economic Information Technology. 2017.

Chakraborty, Achin. And Chakraborty, Indrani. "Female work participation and gender differential in earning in West Bengal." Kolkata: Institute of Development Studies. 2009.

Chaudhuri, Samhita and Bhattacharya, Susmita. "Girl Child Education in West Bengal: Issues and Scenario," *International Journal of Social Science and Management Studies* 7, no 12. (2022).

"Chorki", Compiled by members of Pritilatar Pathshala and Ashu Timirer Pathshala. Published by Jadavpur Commune. Kolkata. (2024).

Das, Upasak and Sarkhel, Prasenjit. "Does more schooling imply improved learning: Evidence from the Kanyashree Prakalpa in India," *Economics of Education Review* 94, (2023) 102406.

Dey, Subhasis. and Ghoshal, Tanisha. “Can Conditional Cash Transfer Defer Child Marriage? Impact of Kanyashree Prakalpa in West Bengal, India,” *Warwick Economic Research Papers*. 2021.

Ghosh, Anweshaa and Ramachandran, Risha and Zaidi, Mubashira, “Women Workers in the Gig Economy in India - An Exploratory Study” (2022).

<https://ssrn.com/abstract=4501098> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4501098>

Govt. of India. “All India Survey on Higher Education 2018-19.” Report by Ministry of Education, Govt. of India. (2018-19).

Govt. of India. “All India Survey on Higher Education 2019-20.” Report by Ministry of Education, Govt. of India. (2019-20).

Govt. of India. “All India Survey on Higher Education 2020-21.” Report by Ministry of Education, Govt. of India. (2020-21).

Govt. of India. “All India Survey on Higher Education 2021-22.” Report by Ministry of Education, Govt. of India. (2021-22).

Govt. of India. “Economic Survey 2023-24.” Report by Ministry of Finance, Govt. of India. 2024. <https://www.indiabudget.gov.in/budget2024-25/economicsurvey/doc/echapter.pdf>

Govt. of India. “Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+).” Report by Ministry of Education, Govt. of India. (2018-19).

Govt. of India. “Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+).” Report by Ministry of Education, Govt. of India. (2019-20).

Govt. of India. “Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+).” Report by Ministry of Education, Govt. of India. (2020-21).

John, E. Mary. “Early and Child Marriage: Exploring Education, Work and Marriage”. *Centre for Women’s Development Studies (CWDS)*. Delhi. 2020.

Khasnabis, Ratan. and Chatterjee, Tania. “Enrolling and Retaining Slum Children in Formal Schools: A Field Survey in Eastern Slums of Kolkata.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no. 22 (2007).

Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST). “*Study to Access the Impact on Mental Health and Emotional Well-Being of Students Across Schools in Delhi Due to Closure of Schools on Account of Covid-19 And Shift to Online Education System.*” (2022).

International Labour Organisation (ILO). “Child Labour in India.” June 8, 2017.

https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@asia/@ro-bangkok/@sro-new_delhi/documents/publication/wcms_557089.pdf.

Juneja, Nalini. “Education in urban areas.” In *The Routledge Handbook of Education in India: Debates, Practices and Policies* edited by Krishna Kumar. Taylor and Francis, pp 26-41. (2022).

Lipman, Pauline. “Education and the right to the City: The Intersection of urban policy, education and poverty”. In the M. W. Apple and S. J. Ball and L. A. Gandin (eds.), *The Routledge International Handbook of the Sociology of Education*, pp.241-252. London: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group. 2010.

Majumdar, Manabi. “From Access to Attainment: Girls Schooling in Contemporary India.” In *Gender and Education in India: A Reader* edited by Nandini Manjrekar. London and New York: Routledge. (2021): 190-205.

Majumdar, Manabi. “The shadow school system and new class divisions in India.” TRG Poverty and Education Working Paper Series Paper 2. Max Weber Stiftung. 2014.

Majumdar, Manabi. “Homogenised Educational Imagination and Polarised Educational Opportunities: Schooling in Contemporary Kolkata” in *Second International Handbook of Urban Education* edited by Willian T. Pink and George W. Noblit. Volume 1. Cham: Springer. 2017.

Manjrekar, Nandini. “Editorial.” *Contemporary Education Dialogue* 18, no. 1 (2021): 7-11. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0973184921994990>.

Manjrekar, Nandini and Indumathi Sudararaman. “Gender and School Reform in India.” *Oxford Research Encyclopedias for Education*. (2021).

Mukherjee, Soumi. and Subrata Mukherjee. “Kanyashree Prakalpa in West Bengal – Desirability and Promises.” *Journal of Indian Education*. 2020.

Nambissan, B. Geetha. “Low-Cost Private Schools for the Poor in India: Some Reflections.” In *India Infrastructure Report 2012: Private Sector in Education* edited by IDFC Foundation. Routledge (2012): 84-93.

Nambissan, B. Geetha. “The “Urban” and Education in India: Section Editor’s Introduction,” in *Second International Handbook of Urban Education* edited by Willian T. Pink and George W. Noblit. Volume 1. Cham: Springer. 2017.

Nambissan, B. Geetha. "Low-cost Education for the Poor in India: Contemporary Concerns." *THE JMC REVIEW: An International Social Sciences Journal of Criticism, Practice and Theory* 4, (2020).

NCERT. "National Education Policy 2020: Reimagining Vocational Education." National Council of Education, Research and Training, Delhi. 2020.

UNFPA India. "Child Marriage in India: Key Insights from NFHS 5". UNFPA Analytical Paper Series #1. (May 2022).

https://india.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/analytical_series_1_-_child_marriage_in_india_-_insights_from_nfhs-5_final_0.pdf

Samanta, Suchitra. "Education as a Path to Being Someone: Muslim Women's Narratives of Aspiration, Obstacles and Achievement in an Impoverished Basti in Kolkata." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*, 37, no. 3 (2016): 151-174.

Sarkar, Raju. "Recent Status of Education, Employment and Empowerment of Women in West Bengal." *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications* 7, no 1. (2017).

Sen, Anindita and Dutta, Arijita. "West Bengal's Successful Kanyashree Prakalpa Programme Needs More Push From State and Beneficiaries," *Economic and Political Weekly* 53, no. 17. (2018).

Sen, Samita. and Sengupta, Nilanjana. "Marriage, Work and Education among Domestic Workers in Kolkata." *Economic and Political Weekly* 47, no. 43 (2012): 67-77.

Sengupta, Indrani. "Complexities of School Choice: Some Reflection from the Field." *SOCIAL TRENDS, Journal of the Department of Sociology, North Bengal University* 6, no. 31 (2019).

Sudarshan, Ratna M. "*Gender Equality Outcomes of the SSA: A Case Study.*" National University of Educational Planning and Administration. (2016).

Yunus, Reva. "'Labour class' Children in Indian classrooms: theorizing urban poverty and schooling." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 43, no. 1 (2021): 104-119,

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/01425692.2021.2003181>



CALCUTTA RESEARCH GROUP

**IA 48, GROUND FLOOR, SECTOR III,
SALT LAKE CITY, KOLKATA – 700 097,
WEST BENGAL, INDIA**

**TEL: +913323350409
FAX: +913323351522
EMAIL: mcrg@mcrg.ac.in**

www.mcrg.ac.in