West Bengal –the current situation for students ,pupils, and teachers in the State’s Government Schools. May-August 2021.

 Shankar Mukerji, Principal of Herodbanga Higher Secondary School, Jharkhali, Basanti District,Sundarbans ,WB has reported that his school has been underwater for the last 4 weeks due to excess rain fall from 2 recent cyclones on top of the regular monsoon weather. He has not seen his students for 18 months. They have not been permitted to attend school, and teachers are unable to contact them in person for fear of reprisals. The State Government is monitoring teacher activity and student contact.

In March 2020 Class 11 ( age16 +) were given examinations on line and mark sheets were collected for each and every subject ( 9 altogether) . Prior to that parents and guardians were asked to distribute tasks on sheets of paper via the midday meal scheme. The teachers had prepared these based on the class text books. Their marking work load was enormous. However Class 11 received their certificates in order to progress to Class 12 last month. 2021.

Sacks of dry ingredients have been available to every family, rural and urban, once a fortnight, delivered by the army or police to distribution centres since the lockdown was introduced. Keeping records has been a nightmare for teachers with 100-186 students per class without face to face contact and lack of communication through internet. It is estimated that only one family in 5 have access to a mobile phone. But some teachers have been able to communicate with parents as teachers are generally in charge of the distribution centres. These are modelled on the way Elections are run – times of admission, queuing by card /electoral number and guarded by local leaders, Police or army.

The WB Education authorities sanctioned the purchasing of tablets for Class 12 students. However the school Heads were responsible for setting up a system whereby each student opened a bank account , registered same with the school and school issued the 10,000 rupees ( 100 UK pounds) to every valid application. All this had to be monitored by the Head – another nightmare! And by the time the bank accounts had been set up, and tablets purchased ,and all paper work checked Class 12 students had left school without employment, and tablets of no use as they had been primed for their leaving certificate instructions.

It is a favourite ploy of the WB administration to sanction money for shoes, bicycles for girls under the Sabooji Sethi Bicycle distribution scheme, tablets, but not mobile phones

However stemming from these initiatives, coined by the WB Chief Minister herself, it was decided that all students from classes 5 – 12 would only be allowed access to schools, both primary and secondary, if they had a bank account. There may be some political intention in such a move as central government, before COVID, was advocating a new national flexible curriculum avoiding repetitive rote learning curriculums which exist in most states. WB prides its self on it’s ‘expert committees’ who write all the text books, set the exams and hold power over what schools are allowed to do in their classrooms. Central Government is pushing for change to make all Government schools English Medium just like the elite, missionary and NGO schools tend to be. The curriculum would be wide, not restricted to 3 core subjects with opportunities for a whole range of creative/technical/sporting subjects to suit the needs of all pupils. We seem to be going the other way In the UK! Exams to be re written along with text books and curriculums.

How it will pan out in WB is difficult to know. Teachers are ready but the administration would not like to be seen to follow central government at the moment. But they have appointed a new Minister of Education who is also an actor. He maybe the person to bring in innovative changes to the traditional rote learning methods seen in most Government Schools in WB.

A group of English teachers in Government schools are promoting a forum where teachers can interact with each other called POET – Professional Outreach for English Teachers. Recently I meet them on what’s app and we had a wonderful session on Assessment for Learning. It was so heartening to be with them and see how keen they are to get back into the classroom. They know it maybe some time in the future after the Puja holidays in October but they are hoping and praying it will be earlier.

Most of them are bringing out a ‘Recovery Curriculum’ as they know their students will have forgotten how to sit at a desk, sit quietly, forgotten how to behave and stand in line which will be based on drama sports and elocution lessons in Bengali and English.

Prasanta Mondal, acting Head of Khanendograth Primary Government Aided School in Jharkhali, Sundarbans, Basanti District, WB, wrote to me and said that his children can also access the midday meal and complete some task sheets he sets. I have been writing short stories for them with tasks sheets which he uses. He can also visit homes where he knows there will not be any reprisals. Jharkhli has had several small cyclones since YASS but damage has been limited to some small boats and flooded embankments. The waters are now receding and the fishermen and farmers are at work again. But the children have lost 2 years of learning and this will, he feels, seriously affect their lives, and any sign of a catch up has taken a back seat. Literate parents make their children study at home but the others laze around doing nothing. He is hoping to start more formal classes under the trees once curfew is lifted and he can make contact with his pupils.

Children in the Brickfield Schools have also been badly hit as there is no need for bricks as the building industry has ground to a halt. Most migrant families have returned to their own states only Bengali families are left to make what bricks they can. Most brickfield owners are using up their stockpiles of bricks when required. The production line will only start again after October but it is unlikely migrant families will return. They earn reasonable money as they are paid by family and if they produce 1000 bricks a day they are given to 400-500 rupees. Government Health visitors and vaccination clinics are operational in all brick fields monitored by the local panchyat. At the moment CRY – an international NGO – Child Rights and You have taken over overseeing the education in the Brickfields of local children, and unlike government schools, they have 4 up and running with approx.. 20 children in each school with one teacher for 2 hours a day.

Jon Ellis now living back in Lyme Regis wrote an article about the Brickfield Schools which was circulated by QSAIG before the pandemic set in. I asked him for an update as he was running the project but as he cannot visit CRY has taken on the project for now. The owners pay the salaries of the teachers, and the fee to the panchyat for using the land – usually about an acre. He or she is a political appointment and has to report on health of brickfield workers and education of children. He is accountable to the District Magistrate.

In spite of COVID taking the lives of many poor people, especially migrant workers, who were forcibly made to return to their villages people are struggling to keep themselves in paid work. Many women from the villages work in the cities but when the transport system was closed for months they could not travel. Some, very few, employers continued to pay them. There was no account taken of the lives lost once the migrant workers had returned . At least panchyats are responsible for the brickfields, in partnership with the owners, so some records are available of death toll but not so in the far away villages not under the scanner.

I am encouraged by the teachers and parents resilience in face of dreadful odds. The Chief Minister, Mamata Banerjee ‘s State Government has been praised by the citizens of WB as she personally supervised the cleaning of state hospitals, the setting up of vaccine centres, fair and equal systems for receiving the vaccine and the mobilization of thousands of army and police personnel to make sure that the vaccine programme was run smoothly. She calls a curfew and tells people how it is and they believe her. Trust goes a long way at a time like this and her people seem to have faith in her so far.

What conditions will be in the coming months for the children of West Bengal in Government Schools as they cannot stay as they are for much longer. I see very hopeful signs of teachers bringing back all their skills to the classroom as they seem to me to have gained in confidence. They have had full pay through out the lockdowns and have been highly praised for their concern for their students and pupils, and their hard work in running the midday meal and vaccine centres. I hope to meet them again, in person, at some point in time.

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