

Child Nutrition and the Right to Education

A Workshop Report

Birbhum, West Bengal, 2012

The Pratichi (India) Trust and CRY (Child Rights and you) – with co-operation from the Birbhum District Primary School Council – organised a workshop on ‘Child Nutrition and Right to Education’, at the Gitanjali auditorium on February 18, 2012. The workshop was attended by teachers from 128 primary schools covered under the Pratichi-CRY project, spread over 5 blocks of Birbhum, representatives from various teachers unions, the school inspector (SI) from the Bolpur Sadar West Circle, representatives from Pratichi, CRY and a few other interested organizations.

The deliberation started through paying a silent homage to the late Shyamoli Khastagir, renowned local social activist. Sujata Gupta then read a written statement on behalf of Pratichi. Then Swagata Nandi recapitulated the work done so far. He pointed out that one of the positive outcomes of the efforts of the last one and half year – in which teachers had immensely helped – was the publication of *Sobai Miley*. This book is the product of teachers’ experience and opinions. Swagata also spelt out the programme of the present year, which included the Reading Festivals – a new venture. He told the audience that they have already organised a few such festivals in the schools in which students of class III to IV participated. They will take place in various other schools soon. He also spoke of the wonderfully positive response to the programme from both students and teachers.

Jitendra Rath from CRY emphasised on special attention towards education of backward children. Implementation of the Right to Education Act is necessary for the all-round development of children. If this is implemented properly, child welfare and child rights will be ensured to a large extent. Besides, Jitendra pointed out that we should bring into the limelight the positive outcomes in schools, which remain more or less obscured.

The main deliberation started after Jitendra's speech. The first session was presided over by Shree Molay Bhattacharya, Najrul Islam and Smt. Archana Ghosh. Teachers from various schools, while narrating their personal experiences, emphasized the importance of ensuring child nutrition, and effective education. The conclusion which emerged are summarised below:

The process of child nutrition begins from her mother's womb; her nutrition is entirely dependent on her mother's nutrition. During her pregnancy and lactative period a mother should get a balanced diet in an adequate amount. This ensures the first steps towards a child's primary nutrition. In the subsequent period, the child's daily diet and habit are determining factors towards her desired level of nutrition. Another factor which produces malnutrition among children is pregnancy at a premature age, as a result of which children become malnourished while in their mothers' womb. Pregnancies at early ages also put both mothers and children's health at stake. Contraception and knowledge about risks should be encouraged to ensure birth of healthy children. Few of the teachers pointed out that discussion with the mother might be very important – towards achieving this objective. In West Bengal MDM was introduced in the primary schools in 2001 to ensure students' nutrition. Many of the participants in the workshop were unanimous that introduction of MDM has substantially increased children's attendance in the schools. Side by side it has, to some extent, however small,

ameliorated malnutrition in children, especially for the children from extremely poor families. However, towards proper implementation of the scheme some problems have been pointed out – particularly the amount of money allocated per child. Teachers assert that from their experience, Rs.3.17 allocated per child is not enough to ensure desired level of child nutrition. And even this low allocation is hampered by delayed payments. Delivery of resources within the proper time, they said, is a matter of extreme importance. One of the teachers said that teachers are handicapped by lack of nutritional knowledge to decide upon the proper menu which would provide adequate calories. This is another reason why children are deprived of adequate nutrition. The deficit in nutrition cannot be removed without the appointment of nutrition specialist and proper nutrition training of the teachers. The method of cooking MDM, cleanliness of the kitchen etc. are also related to nutrition. Hygiene, health consciousness and nutrition are inseparably related to each other.

Few of the participants stressed the need to strengthen the administrative set up for advancement of child education and nutrition.

Thirdly, as education is not possible without nutrition, lack of education also reinforces malnutrition. It goes without saying that if ‘Right to Education’ (RTE) is made mandatory, the social infrastructure will also improve. Thus RTE is used as one of the contributing factors of social development. We are aware that in the RTE Act, some aspects have been clearly spelt out, such as the minimum distance between two schools, pupil teacher ratio (PTR) and the facilities to be provided by school, documents to be produced while a child is being enrolled in a school, the minimum age of the child to be enrolled, special curriculum according to requirement, the responsibility of teachers, parents and government, school infrastructures etc. These must now be implemented and monitored.

Before the RTA comes into force, it should be available to everybody so that all aspects of the act are made clear to all through a wide public discussion. The teachers who participated in the workshop requested the administration to provide them with all information regarding the Act. Tapas Bhattacharya, an eminent local teacher, said that a child is not solely responsible if she fails in an examination. Her family, as well as her teacher has also failed. Her private tutors, if she has any, are also a contributing factor. He also added that the students in his school become reluctant to go home after school as they have deep antipathy towards private tuition, which their parents consider necessary. In fact, many teachers spoke against the custom of private tuition, and the importance of realizing how they curb a child's learning process.

Najrul Islam, another para teacher, said that the socio-economic condition of families is one of the factors behind school dropouts, because children from economically deprived families get engaged in earning activities as they grow up. To ensure their right to education, the community's socio-economic conditions have to be improved, otherwise progress cannot be sustained.

It has been emphasized to strengthen the administrative set up to improve quality education, teachers should be relieved of their other public duties. They should be engaged only in teaching activities. The teachers have expressed that because of various non-teaching activities & training they cannot put all their efforts in teaching. One teacher has pointed out that because of these reasons, they cannot complete the prescribed syllabus in class, which probably encourages private tuition.

All the teachers were unanimous in that in order to ensure children's rights to education and nutrition, they should be responsible to their duties towards the society and be more serious towards implementation of both the MDM and the RTE. The second session of the workshop was chaired by Smt. Manabi Majumdar. At the beginning of the session Prof. Amartya Sen released two books – the two was the English translation of *Sobai Miley* (trans., Priyanka Nandy) based on the experience of local teachers, and 'Sishu Shikkhar Bhumika' written by Amartya Sen. Manabi Majumdar summed up the discussions of the attendees.

Manabendra Ghosh, SI of Bolpur Sadar West Circle said that immunisation of the mother should be stressed upon simultaneously while focusing upon child nutrition, since mothers can give birth to a healthy child only if their nutrition is ensured.

Radha Madhab Bhattacharya, the head teacher of Aradangali Primary School read a pledge for Amartya Sen, on behalf of all primary teachers in Birbhum.

"We, all teachers of primary & junior basic schools in Birbhum present here promise that we would fully participate in implementing compulsory Right to Child education & child nutrition. We will also ensure primary education of all children (5 to 13 yrs) in our locality, there would be no out of school children. We shall put all our efforts to improve the environment of the schools. Through this pledge we pay our respect to Professor Sen, the architect of modern education".

While discussing child nutrition, Sen said that the lack of education weakens the power of thinking. MDM is helpful for nutrition although its scope is limited to a certain extent. Time has come to discuss about enlarging its capacity. In some part of our country the programme is going well but in other parts the

performance is poor. This disparity is to be removed. Besides, he advised the attending group to broaden their interest into other inequalities as well, among them gender disparity. This is to be removed at all levels of the society, including in education, because the development of the country is related to women's development. Bangladesh is ahead of India in increasing life expectancy of women, reducing undernourishment, and mortality rates. These aspects should be adequately focused upon. He also remarked that syllabus should be properly prepared for advancement of education, and not test capacity for rote learning. The quality of education is to be ensured so that the children can grasp the syllabus at a desired level. Sen advised teachers to be more committed towards their responsibilities. For this purpose parent teachers' meeting should be held at the schools, as collective effort alone can ensure quality education. Finally, the workshop ended with a request for all of those attending to come forward and work together to ensure children's right to an education and nutrition, over all barriers.