

Reducing Out-of-School Children in India

Lessons from a Micro Study

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Abstract

Ensuring formal education to all children has been an area of lively debate throughout the world for about a decade with several viewpoints emerging. Sadly, Universalisation of Elementary Education is still a distant prospect in substantial parts of the globe, including India. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan was launched in India in 2001 to extend useful and quality elementary education to all children in the age group of 6-14 years before the end of 2010. It has been able to bring the children to school but has failed to retain them and high incidence of drop-out emerges to be the most critical problem facing the Indian education scenario. Using information gathered from Field Surveys in selected rural areas of West Bengal, the present paper explores the trends in school drop-out, reasons behind leaving schools, performance of current programmes and policies in reducing school drop-out and suggests steps to make these programmes more effective. Low level of income emerges to be the most crucial factor responsible for the incidence of out-of-school children. Other factors include insufficient educational infrastructure, earning opportunities for children, lack of awareness among parents etc. It seems that time has come to refocus and reorient the operation of SSA, transforming it from an infrastructure based approach to a facilitating approach. A targeted approach with different policies for retention of different age-groups of children in schools should be taken. The gender and regional dimensions should also be taken into consideration and policies must reflect local socio-economic conditions. A concerted and converging approach with economic growth, poverty eradication and expansion of elementary education going hand in hand is the need of the hour.

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Introduction

Throughout the world ensuring formal education to all children has been an area of lively debate for about a decade with many different viewpoints on the issue. The Millennium Development Goals (MDG) also speak of Universalisation of Primary Education and Promoting Gender Equality in Education. The World Declaration on Education for All, the Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs, the E9 Declaration for Education for All and the 40-year old Universal Declaration of Human Rights were aimed at giving prominence to basic education. The Jomtien Conference of 1990 established the goal of achieving basic Education for All (EFA) by the year 2000 and provided an expanded vision for basic education, to include early childhood care and education, programmes for out-of-school children and literacy programmes for adults. In spite of all the rhetoric, universal access to basic education still remains an unfulfilled pledge in many parts of the world, despite pronouncements at various international fora. Sadly, Universalisation of Elementary Education (UEE) is still a distant prospect in substantial parts of the globe, including India. About a decade back, in 1999-2000, only 69 per cent of rural children (aged 6-14 years) and 83 per cent of urban children in India were going to school, the percentages being further lower if we include children up to 16 years, the age by which students complete school education in India. Under such circumstances, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) was launched in India in 2001 to extend useful and quality elementary education to all children in the age group of 6-14 years before the end of 2010. While it has been fairly successful in improving the Enrolment in schools, only marginal dent has been made in the Drop-out rates. The core issue therefore now is how to retain children in schools and reduce the magnitude of Out-of-School Children (OOSC).¹ The present paper, using both secondary data at national level and primary data from selected areas of rural West Bengal, explores the trends in school drop-out, reasons behind leaving schools, how programmes and policies have fared in reducing school drop-out and how to make these policies more effective.

Trends in Enrolment and Drop-Out

As has been mentioned, SSA has been a flagship programme to achieve the MDG of Universalisation of Elementary Education (UEE). This programme includes specific schemes for the development of pre-primary education, education of female children, education of children belonging to SC/ST community, education of mentally and physically challenged children, education of the school drop-outs and the education of the displaced children. School lunch programme, Computer education at the elementary level, activity oriented education, education through 'Bridge Courses', 'Remedial Courses' and 'Back to School Camps' are some of its other schemes. The Government of India implements the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) in partnership with the State Governments/Union Territories and the Local Self-Governments. The SSA targeted the Physical factors like school infrastructure – both physical and human. The modus operandi of SSA was to start informal educational centres in regions and hamlets not served by formal schools, run short-term camps for Out-of-School Children so that they can be brought back to formal schools, improve

¹ Out-of-School Children are all those children who do not attend any educational centres (formal or informal) on a regular basis.

infrastructure in existing formal schools to make it a better and attractive place for children and fund appointment of Shikhsa Sahayikas to supplement the number of teachers.

TABLE 1
Enrolment and Drop-Out Rates in Primary and Middle Levels

States	Net Enrolment Ratio				Drop Out Rate			
	2000-01		2008-09		2000-01		2008-09	
	Primary	Middle	Primary	Middle	Primary	Middle	Primary	Middle
A & N Islands	82.7	53.7	66.8	60.3	5.6	33.4	6.4	9.0
Andhra Pradesh	58.2	30.0	79.4	58.1	40.3	66.5	24.0	56.7
Arunachal Pradesh	71.2	38.8	-	75.1	50.2	64.9	30.4	54.0
Assam	77.9	43.5	-	71.7	33.7	69.8	44.3	73.6
Bihar	63.1	31.6	-	43.4	57.3	77.6	51.6	76.1
Chandigarh	65.5	68.1	72.8	59.2	0.0	0.0	22.5	36.9
Chhattisgarh			98.0	54.7			25.3	0.0
Dadra & Nagar Haveli	72.2	31.1	-	54.2	31.5	57.0	34.3	44.0
Daman & Diu	80.2	52.2	75.9	57.1	3.6	3.1	5.0	12.8
Delhi	76.8	81.7	90.6	70.5	5.7	15.2	0.0	23.5
Goa	78.9	57.3	56.3	44.4	8.6	10.1	-	-
Gujarat	76.1	56.1	86.0	41.9	29.5	61.0	25.7	49.3
Haryana	67.8	50.4	71.6	51.1	14.6	31.0	9.3	0.0
Himachal Pradesh	82.3	64.1	91.2	80.7	35.4	26.4	6.8	4.5
Jammu & Kashmir	52.1	47.6	95.2	67.6	51.8	37.6	12.5	41.2
Jharkhand			-	54.2			41.9	0.0
Karnataka	78.2	48.5	98.6	60.0	28.9	62.5	11.9	38.8
Kerala	77.2	82.0	65.3	66.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Lakshadweep	87.6	54.3	84.6	64.7	2.7	24.9	-	0.0
Madhya Pradesh	76.3	37.2	-	64.2	19.0	47.2	0.0	48.4
Maharashtra	70.9	47.6	88.0	67.9	20.3	29.6	2.6	21.9
Manipur	89.6	67.3	-	69.0	43.3	43.1	45.7	41.2
Meghalaya	56.4	28.2	-	51.0	57.4	77.7	44.1	60.4
Mizoram	77.4	43.0	-	80.8	51.6	65.8	49.6	62.6
Nagaland	47.1	25.7	-	62.6	46.7	40.3	20.2	38.6
Orissa	72.9	43.9	95.5	61.4	36.1	62.8	27.8	62.6
Puducherry	90.7	87.2	85.2	79.4	-6.3	0.3	0.0	0.0
Punjab	72.6	54.6	59.7	49.6	22.5	29.9	9.9	29.9
Rajasthan	55.7	35.4	-	57.3	52.5	44.9	40.7	62.3
Sikkim	56.7	21.1	98.0	35.8	58.9	70.3	24.3	65.9
Tamil Nadu	78.1	86.9	99.3	90.5	41.1	43.2	8.0	0.0
Tripura	91.8	48.4	-	80.6	49.5	68.2	18.2	50.5
Uttar Pradesh	47.6	40.6	-	43.3	56.6	53.0	31.1	44.2
Uttarakhand			91.2	64.3			18.6	0.0
West Bengal	50.1	31.0	84.5	54.6	54.1	70.9	30.1	61.4
All States	64.2	44.8	98.6	56.2	40.3	54.5	25.4	46.0

Source: Author's calculation based on DISE (2009), MHRD (2002).

During ten years of its operation since 2000, ₹ 5700 billion has been allocated to SSA through Union Budgets from 1999-2000 to 2009-10. This has enabled the SSA to finance

construction of 248465 school buildings and 978738 additional classrooms in existing schools by March 2009. To equip more and more schools with basic amenities, 189729 schools were provided with drinking water facilities and 263899 schools with toilet facilities. 986 thousand new teachers were recruited during this period to solve the problem of under-staffed schools and high student-teacher ratio. The scheme succeeded to a large extent, and by 2004-05 prevalence of elementary school attendance among corresponding age-group children increased to about 80 per cent in rural areas and 88 per cent in urban areas (as obtained from NSSO, 61st Round Survey). In addition, another 1.6 million children were going to school in a subsidiary capacity, mostly to informal centres under SSA, after completing their principal activity outside school. It is observed that over the period 2001-2008, Net Enrolment Ratio² increased from 64.2 to 98.6 per cent at the primary level and from 49 per cent to 56 per cent at the middle level (Table 1). The Drop-Out Rate³ on the other hand has decreased from 40 per cent to 25 per cent at the primary level and from 56 per cent to 46 per cent at the middle level during this period. At the regional level, more than 70 per cent students in Bihar and Assam, and more than 60 per cent students in Rajasthan, Orissa, West Bengal, Sikkim, Mizoram and Meghalaya drop out before completing Middle level of schooling. More than 40 per cent of the students drop out even before completing the primary level of education in the states of Bihar, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, and Mizoram while this ratio is more than 30 per cent in West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh. The situation is significantly better in Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Uttarakhand. Thus the success of SSA has mainly been concentrated to the area of enrolment, and that too, at the Primary level, with transition to and completion of Middle level remaining poor. It is evident that there is no significant improvement in the area of drop-out, both at the Primary and Middle levels, but more so at the latter stage. The question that arises now is how to retain the children in formal schools after they come out of the ambit of informal centres run by SSA. This is an important issue since the purpose of SSA will be defeated if children continue dropping out of formal schools and swell the numbers of OOSC, perpetuating the clientele of alternate institutions under SSA which are typically short term and remedial in nature.

Why Children Drop Out?

It is argued that in developing countries with inadequate educational infrastructure, poverty, inequality, social norms, credit-land-labour market imperfections, high fertility and unpredictable employment scenario, children drop out of schools at an early age. Schools are

² Net Enrolment Ratio is the ratio of population of a particular age group enrolled at a specific level of schooling to the total population in that age group. Thus, for instance, NER for primary classes will be ratio of children of 6 to below 11 years enrolled in classes I to V to the total number of children in the age group 6 to 11 years. The ratio overcomes the shortcoming of gross enrolment ratio as it captures age-specific enrolment of students in the classes they ought to be as per the prevailing norms for school enrolments.

³ Drop-out Rate is the ratio of enrolled children of a particular stage who drop-out of school before completing the stage to the total number of enrolled children in that particular stage. For example, Drop-out Rate for Primary stage would be proportion of children enrolled in class I-V who drop-out before completing primary education to the total number of enrolled children in class I-V.

too far, often in dilapidated buildings, if any, with handful of teachers and dearth of facilities like drinking water and toilets, making education an ordeal for the children. Timings of formal schools are rigid and often in conflict with other activities of children, especially in rural areas. Even when children do go to school, they do not find any incentive in completing school stages since post-school employment scenario is bleak and there are no significant additional returns to school education. All these factors interplay to persuade children to leave school and these decisions are taken mostly by their parents.

TABLE 2
Correlation of Children's Status with Causal Variables

Proportion of Children	Poverty ^a			Primary Schools ^b		
	1993	1999	2004	1993	1999	2004
School Going	-0.62*	-0.64**	-0.68**	0.31	0.17	-
Child Labour	0.09	-	0.18	-0.30	-0.27	-0.36*
Nowhere Children	0.66**	0.66**	0.65**	-0.21	-0.10	

Note: Based on State level data for the year 2004-05. ** indicates significant at 1% level, * indicates significant at 10% level, coefficients with significance level above 20% are not reported. a - Percentage of people below poverty line; b - Primary Schools per 1000 Square KM.

The success of SSA in creating more and better equipped educational centres and bringing children to school over the last decade vindicates this view. Positive association between spatial spread of primary schools (measured by number of primary schools per thousand square km) and incidence of *School Attendance* seem to indicate that indeed physical infrastructure has a major role to play in retaining children in schools (Table 2). However, will this be sufficient in ensuring full term schooling among children? Perhaps not, as SSA has failed to address the social and economic issues related to school drop-out. A significantly negative association between levels of Poverty and incidence of *School Attendance* at the macro level indicates that poor children are more often not sent to school in spite of the infrastructure being in place. Thus, fulfilling only the physical targets as set by SSA are not sufficient to ensure that the children complete schooling. More comprehensive policy formulation with emphasis on retention is crucial in achieving the MDG of Universalising Education. This requires closer understanding of the problems of out-of-school children. An attempt has been made to explore this issue has been make in the next section using information from field surveys.

Out-of-School Children – Interplay of Several Factors

Survey Background

As has been already noted, apart from the areas targeted by SSA, various other factors keep children out of school. To bring to light factors that keep children out of school we have undertaken a Field Survey in selected rural areas of West Bengal. This would help us in identifying the problems faced by the stakeholders and their actual requirement. We interacted with the out-of-school children, their parents, NGOs, Self Help Groups and

Administrators of several programmes to elicit information and arrive at policy conclusions. The first part of the Field Survey (Survey-I) was carried on in selected rural areas of four districts of West Bengal – Bardhaman, Birbhum, Bankura, and Purulia. While Bardhaman is a developed district, Birbhum and Bankura are moderately developed districts and Purulia is a declared backward district. Such a selection enables us to understand the role of economic conditions in affecting children's schooling status. Survey was conducted through a set of Structured Questionnaire in the Households, mainly to identify children engaged in different activities. The second part of the survey (Survey-II) was a more intensive one and was undertaken in Bardhaman and parts of Purulia district to critically examine the situation of children who are out of formal schools, their background characteristics, their reasons for not attending formal schools etc. In addition, various stakeholders like Government Officials, NGOs, members of SHGs and PRIs, and Administrators of Formal Schools and Informal education centres running under various schemes of the government were interviewed to elicit information and opinion. While many of the survey findings have been quantified, the essence of this paper is qualitative in nature and field experience and perception of the author play a major role in arriving at the inferences and suggestions. The broad findings and their implications are discussed below. But first, some background information on the four districts as obtained from secondary sources.

TABLE 3
District Profile - Schooling Facilities and Schooling Performance

Indicators	Purulia	Bankura	Birbhum	Bardhaman	All WB
Primary Schools per 1000 population	1.30	1.11	0.80	0.61	0.76
Middle Schools per 1000 population	0.13	0.14	0.25	0.12	0.13
Villages with Primary School (%)	79.50	69.48	71.43	85.25	69.09
Villages with Middle School (%)	9.54	8.80	13.48	19.30	13.58
Schools with Pucca Building (%)	76.63	74.34	78.75	80.26	55.88
Schools with Drinking Water (%)	80.28	93.00	84.86	94.88	77.21
Schools with Toilet (%)	37.38	73.81	77.14	93.42	67.54
Enrolment Rate – Primary	95.00	94.98	94.12	75.65	81.00
Enrolment Rate – Middle	51.82	57.57	56.12	49.12	49.37
School Drop-Out Rate – Primary	42.30	17.70	9.00	18.40	25.80
School Drop-Out Rate – Middle	34.10	36.10	43.80	37.30	37.60

Source: DISE (2009).

Children in Formal Schools

If we consider secondary data obtained from *District Information on School Education* (DISE, 2009), it is observed that in the densely populated district of Bardhaman, which is highly developed both in agriculture and industry, the spread of schools per thousand population is low compared to other districts (Table 3). This results in lower enrolment ratio both at primary and middle levels. The basic amenities in the existing schools are better compared to other districts, but that seems to be of lesser importance in attracting children to school. The extensive agricultural sector and high incidence of family farms may

also have some contribution in this regard by engaging children. On the other hand, in the comparatively less populated and less developed district of Purulia the spread of schools per thousand population is higher, leading to higher enrolment, though this district lags behind Bardhaman with respect to basic amenities in existing schools. However, drop-out at the primary stage is highest in Purulia, indicating that students get enrolled but very often leave school before completing primary schooling. It thus seems that availability and accessibility of educational infrastructure especially in terms of distribution of schools per thousand population is an important factor in determining the size of the educational net. The other two districts of Bankura and Birbhum exhibit enrolment figures in between Purulia and Bardhaman for the primary stage and higher enrolment for the middle stage. Drop-out rates in Bankura and Birbhum are lower than the other two districts for primary stage and at par for the middle stage. However these findings are based on DISE data, which reflects mostly the formal schooling system since reporting under DISE by informal educational centres is very rare in West Bengal. In our field survey we have also taken into consideration the informal schooling system under SSA and hence obtained a considerably different picture. These, we discuss in the next section. The descriptive structure of the Field Data is depicted in Table 4.

TABLE 4
Descriptive Features of Field Data

Survey	Indicators	Purulia	Bankura	Birbhum	Bardhaman	Total
Survey - I	Households Surveyed	2550	123	229	3951	6853
	Children Surveyed	6840	393	421	5298	12952
Survey - II	Households Surveyed	42	-	-	205	247
	Children Surveyed	172	-	-	245	415

Source: Author's Calculation based on Field Data collected during 2008-09.

Survey Findings

Estimates of OOSC

Table 5 provides estimates of OOSC from Survey-I field data. It is observed that about 19 per cent of the surveyed children are out of school, of which two-fifths are working while the rest are neither going to school nor working. In sharp contrast to the enrolment figures obtained from DISE, the incidence of OOSC is highest in the backward district of Purulia, followed by Bankura and Birbhum and least in the developed district of Bardhaman. The informal wing of the SSA is found to be operating fairly successfully in the district of Bardhaman through Bridge Course Centres, Mobile Camps, etc. As a result the quantum of OOSC reduces to a large extent when informal schooling is taken into consideration. In the district of Purulia, on the other hand, intense poverty dominates over all other factors and children are withdrawn from school. It is also found that while incidence of work is more among boys compared to girls, being 'Nowhere' is more common among girls than boys, especially for the 10-14 year age group. Being out of school is more frequent among girls than boys for the higher years age group indicating that girls are sooner withdrawn from schools while boys continue their education a bit longer.

TABLE 5
Survey-I Findings – Out-of-School Children

District	Variables	5 – 9 Years			10 – 14 Years			All
		Boys	Girls	All	Boys	Girls	All	Total
Purulia	Out of School	60.8	61.9	61.4	44.4	58.2	51.3	61.6
	Working	15.5	12.3	14.1	24.8	8.5	15.6	15.3
	Being No-Where	44.5	49.6	47.3	19.6	49.7	35.7	46.3
Bankura	Out of School	31.6	31.0	31.3	20.0	51.7	34.4	32.8
	Working	18.4	13.8	16.4	20.0	20.7	20.3	18.3
	Being No-Where	13.2	17.2	14.9	0.0	31.0	14.1	14.5
Birbhum	Out of School	21.4	10.3	16.9	11.1	21.2	15.9	16.5
	Working	0.0	0.0	0.0	8.3	3.0	5.8	2.9
	Being No-Where	21.4	10.3	16.9	2.8	18.2	10.1	13.6
Bardhaman	Out of School	11.1	10.3	10.6	0.0	14.3	9.1	10.1
	Working	7.4	2.6	4.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.0
	Being No-Where	3.7	7.7	6.1	0.0	14.3	9.1	7.1
All Total	Out of School	17.7	16.5	17.2	13.2	30.1	21.6	19.2
	Working	8.4	5.2	6.9	12.0	8.4	10.2	8.4
	Being No-Where	9.3	11.3	10.3	1.2	21.7	11.4	10.8

Source: Author's Calculation based on Field Data collected from Survey-I during 2008-09.

Linkage with School Infrastructure

We examined whether the incidence of OOSC is related with the lack of school infrastructure – absence of schools, distance of schools, lack of facilities in schools, etc. It was earlier noted that when only the formal schooling system was considered, educational infrastructure in terms of distribution of schools per thousand population emerged as an important factor in determining the enrolment levels at the district level while other amenities seemed to be of lesser importance. But when we consider informal schooling system also, we find that magnitude of OOSC seems to be negatively linked with school facilities in the district (Table 6). Districts with better facilities are also those with lesser incidence of OOSC.

TABLE 6
Schooling Facilities and Out-of-School Children

Indicators	Purulia	Bankura	Birbhum	Bardhaman
Schools with Pucca Building (%)	76.63	74.34	78.75	80.26
Schools with Drinking Water (%)	80.28	93.00	84.86	94.88
Schools with Toilet (%)	37.38	73.81	77.14	93.42
Out-of-School Children – (5-9 Yrs) %	61.4	31.3	16.9	10.6
Out-of-School Children – (9-14 Yrs) %	51.3	34.4	15.9	9.1

Source: DISE (2009).

However, it seems that we have crossed the stage of acute shortage of basic physical infrastructure. Most of the schools now have their own buildings and mid-day meals are

served in most of them. The problems being faced right now are qualitative in nature. In an overwhelming majority of the primary schools there is acute shortage of teachers leading to chaos and indifference in classrooms. Curriculum and teaching methods are neither interesting nor inspiring and students hardly develop any interest towards their studies. Most of the students come to school for the purpose of having the mid-day meal only. Perhaps this is leading to high drop-out rates in the higher classes. A more effective schooling system with adequate number of teachers and a better rapport between the teachers and the students can make the process of imparting quality education easier. A favourable teacher-student ratio and more initiative on the part of the teacher can play a very vital role in this respect.

Linkage with Poverty

During the field visits, it was evident that the parents generally want their children to attend school and continue education but are most often left helpless because they lack adequate income. Thus poverty seems to have a very vital role in determining the status of the children. Field experience suggests that rather than incidence of poverty (most often measured by *Head Count Ratio*), intensity of poverty is more important in pulling children out from school. This is supported by the fact that incidence of OOSC, especially among the boys, is much higher in Purulia where the severity of poverty, indicated by *Income Gap Ratio*, is much higher (Table 7). Moderate level of poverty prepares the ground for withdrawing children from school but may not actually push them out unless reinforced by factors like lack of educational infrastructure, availability of earning opportunities for the children (e.g. in the mining areas and the brick kilns of Bardhaman district). On the other hand, acute poverty of the nature observed in Purulia is sufficient to remove children from schools. In this case, the children are engaged in some or other remunerative jobs even if the jobs are ill-paid and accessible educational infrastructure is present. Even if they are provided incentives to continue education through various government schemes like National Child Labour Mission. Alternative educational centres under SSA, etc. they are often found to attend only the non-formal centres and tend to drop out again when they are put into formal schools on completion of such courses.

TABLE 7
Consumption, Poverty Levels and OOSC

Indicators	Purulia	Bankura	Birbhum	Bardhaman	State
Mean Consumption Levels (MPCE - Rs)	492	588	490	685	609
Poverty - Head Count Ratio %	31.7	28.5	38.1	22.4	34.7
Poverty - Income Gap Ratio %	29.2	18.7	25.0	18.6	21.7
Out-of-School Children - (5-9 yrs) %	61.4	31.3	16.9	10.6	17.2
Out-of-School Children - (10-14 yrs) %	51.3	34.4	15.9	9.1	21.6

Source: NSSO (2005); DISE - 2009; Field Survey 2008-09

Note: MPCE is in ₹ per Capita at current prices; Poverty figures are Author's calculations from NSSO (2005)

Lack of local earning opportunities for the adults also affect children's schooling through the process of migration. In backward districts of Bankura and Purulia, people migrate to neighbouring districts during busy agricultural season in search of employment. The children often accompany their family as both parents migrate and therefore discontinue schooling. Once they return, the child cannot keep pace with the studies in formal school and drop-out.

It is therefore evident that intensity of poverty is an important factor responsible for the persistence of OOSC, and hence employment-generating schemes that augment earning of the parents would be immensely helpful in combating this problem. It was thought that MGNREGS will bring a revolution in this respect. At the ground level, however, various bottlenecks seem to be hindering effective operation of MGNREGS. In the developed regions the market wage rate is higher than the wage rate paid by MGNREGS leading to lack of labour supply. This not only causes non-utilisation of funds but also deprives the region of the infrastructure that are supposed to be built under this scheme. In the underdeveloped regions, on the other hand, the supply of labour outstrips the labour demand generated by the scheme. This mismatch between demand and supply of labour acts as a detrimental factor for successful operation of this scheme. Moreover, in many cases, the households suffering from acute poverty and lack of employment have not been able to get the Job Cards due to various local factors and hence are not getting jobs under MGNREGS. Though efforts have been made to maintain transparency by paying wages directly to Bank Accounts or Post Office Accounts of the labourer, in many cases there are instances of late payments. More effective operation of these schemes can go a long way in solving the problem of school drop-out through income generation for the parents and creation of local earning opportunities and tackling migration.

Different regions have different comparative advantages depending on the availability of natural resources. A decentralised approach of income generation depending on the potential of the specific region is the need of the hour. For example, in agriculturally developed areas like Bardhaman stress may be given on animal husbandry, handicrafts, and textiles; whereas in mono-cropping dry land areas like Bankura and Purulia schemes must focus on creation of check-dams, rain-water harvesting and watershed development for multi-cropping. Formation of various Self Help Groups may also play a very vital role in this respect and a coordinated approach between governmental and non-governmental organisations can go a long way in solving this problem. Though some instances of success are already there, they should be more widely replicated.

Children's Job Availability

While poverty creates an enabling atmosphere, lucrative earning opportunities also attract out-of-school children in some regions. For example in the mining areas, the children are often found to be engaged in illegal collection of coal etc. As a result, during Survey-II, it was observed that in the western region of Bardhaman, which is predominantly a mining area, more than 32 per cent of the boys are out of school because of their engagement in earning opportunities (Table 8a and 8b). Most of the jobs being of illegal mining, engagement of girls is rare. On the other hand, in agriculturally developed areas, there are twin roles of children – either they are working themselves in the field or they are engaged in domestic duties while their parents are working in the field. As a result, both Household work and Working

to earn are important reasons for being out of school. It is however to be noted that while common perception is that Domestic duties would be an important reason for Girls being out of school, in our survey Financial problem emerges to be the main culprit. It appears that the parents perceive that they are not financially sound enough to spend both for educating their daughters as well as their marriage. As a result they sacrifice the former for the latter. In the regions with dense forest cover children are often found to be engaged in firewood collection and collection of various kinds of forest products both for self-consumption and selling. This also induces parents to withdraw children from schools. In some cases the cartels are so strong that administrative intervention are also unable to resist the forces effectively. In these cases, not only are the children deprived of their childhood and blooming of their inherent potential but also face severe health hazards. Thus both their physical and mental developments are adversely affected. Stronger enforcement of the child labour prevention acts is necessary. An effective monitoring agency that can perform the dual role of enforcing the laws on one hand and also build up awareness among the people regarding the evil effects of the incidence of child labour should be put in place. Some compensation scheme for rehabilitation of the working children can make the job easier. Awareness building by children themselves, like few girls in Purulia who have been able to create a wave of admiration and emulation, is also an important part of the strategy.

TABLE 8A
Survey Findings (II) – Reasons for being Out of Formal School –
Boys in Bardhaman

Percent of Learners	Total	East	Central	West
Left due to				
Financial Problem	12.1	3.8	18.0	10.0
Household Work	18.1	34.6	8.0	20.0
Working to Earn	26.7	23.1	24.0	32.5
Poor Performance	3.4	7.7	4.0	0.0
Lack of Interest / Incentive	15.5	11.5	20	12.5
Parents not Interested	6.0	3.8	10	2.5
Poor School Environment/ Ill Treatment by Teachers	18.1	15.4	16.0	22.5

Source: Field Survey, 2008.

TABLE 8B
Survey Findings (II) – Reasons for being Out of Formal School – Girls in Bardhaman

Percent of Learners	Total	East	Central	West
Left due to				
Financial Problem	40.8	20.0	60.0	22.5
Household Work including Sibling Care	10.0	15.0	8.3	10.0
Working to Earn	10.8	25.0	6.7	10.0
Poor Performance	3.3	5.0	5.0	0.0
Lack of Interest / Incentive	10.0	15.0	6.7	12.5
Parents not Interested	13.3	10.0	8.3	22.5
Poor School Environment / Ill Treatment by Teachers	11.7	10.0	5.0	22.5

Source: Field Survey, 2008.

Apart from poverty, a major reason behind high incidence of school drop-out and therefore No-where children is the inefficiency of the formal schooling system. The children very often are utterly disinterested to go to nearby primary schools and are often scared of the teachers. In many cases these schools suffer from acute shortage of teachers also and for a single teacher to manage 4-5 classes becomes an impossible feat. Students learn nothing and teachers wield the stick just to maintain some sort of discipline. Thus even the provision of mid-day meals cannot prevent the children from dropping out. In our survey, 18 per cent of boys and 12 per cent of girls in Bardhaman district say that poor school environment and ill-treatment by teachers are reasons for their dropping out.

The informal schooling system (e.g. Sishu Shiksha Kendras, NCLP Schools, Bridge Course Centres), on the contrary, is found to be much more effective not only in developing interest among the students but also motivating the drop-outs to join these schools and continue their education. The personal rapport of the students with the teachers plays a pivotal role in successful operation of these informal schooling systems. There are 605 Bridge Course Centres in Bardhaman district operating under Sarva Shiksha Mission. Managed by the Gram Panchayats and Village Education and Health Committees, they have been tutoring 13 thousand of the total 35 thousand out-of-school children in 2007-08. So far they have been able to mainstream 5000 of these children. Given the fact that these centres operate only for 9 months a year there is no doubt that they are doing a very good job. Most significant success of the scheme is that the learners are now attracted towards education and they want to continue their studies. In Purulia district, out-of-school working children have been brought under the ambit of National Child Labour Project and it is found that the NCLP schools are doing a very good job in bringing the out of school working children back to school, who ultimately are mainstreamed and admitted to formal schools. Various innovative techniques are used by these schools to provide not only general education but also some amount of vocational training. In 90 special schools under this scheme, quality education is provided to the withdrawn child labourers through participatory learning methods. The objective is to make the special schools child-friendly and to make learning joyful to the students. As a result, in less than two years, more than 1000 students have been mainstreamed and there is not a single case of drop-out from formal schools among the students coming from NCLP schools so far. The NCLP Schools have been able to motivate the children to fight social evils as well. Three such girls spoke up against their own early marriage and this created a spark across this district, obtaining special prize from the Honourable President of India. They are now working actively to create awareness against child work and early marriage.

Concluding Comments

It is thus evident from our Field Study that the crucial areas that require intervention are: Employment creation and Income generation for the adults, Revitalising the Education system through out of the box non-formal methods, and Prevention of engagement of children in work. While various policies have been adopted in these areas and numerous schemes are operative, some modifications and streamlining seems necessary to make them more effective. Some of these issues are discussed below.

The problem of Out-of-School Children is deeply rooted in the socio-economic structure of our nation. Children are out of school because of various reasons – poverty and lack of educational infrastructure emerging to be most important among them. Factors like availability of lucrative job opportunities for the children, lack of consciousness among the parents, gender discrimination, etc. are also very much prevalent. The reasons vary across regions. Whereas in the agriculturally developed regions children substitute adult labour doing domestic duties and also working in family farms, in the backward areas they emerge to be *No-where Children* who neither have the economic condition to carry on their education, nor have sufficient employment opportunities. While SSA has been able to improve enrolment situation it has not been able to stem drop-out as evident from high incidence of Out-of-School Children.

While boys are withdrawn from school and sent to work, the initial brunt falls on the girls who are withdrawn much before their brothers to simply stay at home and help their mothers. Thus incidence of No-where children is much more among girls. To do away with such gender disparity, building up awareness among the people in general and the parents in particular is necessary.

At the conclusion it may be stated that it is now necessary to refocus and reorient the operation of SSA, transforming it from an infrastructure based approach to a facilitating approach. Rather than merely improving entry, the focus must now shift to retention. A targeted approach should be taken whereby different policies should be formed for retention of different age-groups of children in schools. The gender and regional dimension should also be taken into consideration and policies must reflect local socio-economic conditions. A concerted approach with economic growth, poverty eradication and expansion of elementary education going hand in hand is the need of the hour. Convergence and better coordination between Rural Development Schemes, NREGS, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan and child labour eradication programme through spread of NCLP schools would succeed in securing a better future for the children.

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