

*WORKING PAPER SERIES ON
LITERACY AND PRIMARY EDUCATION*

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**PRIMARY EDUCATION AMONG LOW INCOME MUSLIMS IN KOLKATA:
SLUM DWELLERS OF PARK CIRCUS**

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Introduction to the Working Paper Series on Literacy and Primary Education

The record of West Bengal on the elementary education and adult literacy front so far, by any reckoning, has not been spectacular. Almost thirty percent of the state's population remained illiterate at the beginning of the present century. A significant proportion of children, especially girls and those belonging to the underprivileged groups, either do not enroll in schools or drop out at an early stage. Although commendable efforts have been made by the government in recent years to spread elementary education among the masses, a great deal remains to be done to realize the goal of universal elementary education in West Bengal. In policy discussions mention is often made of various constraining factors, the empirical and analytical bases of which do not always seem very strong. However, it is now being increasingly perceived that the problem largely lies on the supply side – the low quality of education received in schools, inadequate post literacy and continuing education efforts, and so forth. In this background, it seems obvious that there is an urgent need for further investigation into the scenario of literacy and primary education in West Bengal.

We, at the Institute of Development Studies Kolkata (IDSK), devised a strategy to promote research in this specific area. We invited research proposals from young teachers, scholars and researchers, focusing on different aspects of literacy and primary education in West Bengal. Through a rigorous process of screening, ten proposals were selected and small research grants were offered to the researchers to carry out their proposed research. Professor Prabhat Datta and Dr. Dipankar Sinha of the Department of Political Science, Calcutta University, were in charge of research supervision, who were helped by the faculty of IDSK at various stages. The researchers also drew on the advice of a group of experts at various stages of their research, and all ten of them have completed their studies and submitted reports.

The problem of dropout at the primary stage, for good reason, has been the central theme in almost all the studies. Several studies have confirmed that the demand side problems, such as compulsions of work to supplement family income, are rather less serious than the supply side bottlenecks. Most parents from low-income households – literate or illiterate – do realize the value of education, and many of them spend a

very high proportion of their income on their children's education. Ironically, the high cost of 'free' education to poor families seems to be a major deterring factor – many children drop out because their parents cannot afford to pay for private tutors. In recent years various efforts have been made to improve the situation. Our researchers have found that Sishu Siksha Kendras (SSK) and the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) have made some contribution in this regard, but the effort has to go further and embrace many dimensions that apparently lie outside the narrow domain of education.

We do not intend to summarise all the findings of the studies here. We feel that the results should be widely disseminated among the educationists, scholars, policy makers and others interested in the problems of illiteracy and primary education. With this aim we have planned this Working Paper Series. All the results will ultimately be put together and presented in a monograph in the near future.

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Abstract

The low level of literacy in the Muslim community is traditionally explained in terms of the values characterising Muslim society. Based on a field survey of slum dwellers in Park Circus and Topsia, this research questions this explanation. It is argued that economic factors and uncertainties in the labour market combine to create a different perception of the cost-benefits of education. The study also examines other facets of education-related decisions: its cost and components, the choice of educational institutions and the preferred medium of instruction, presence of any gender bias, and the relation between drop-outs and child labour.

Key words: India, Kolkata, Primary education, Muslim, Child labour.

INTRODUCTION

Two centuries ago, Muslims constituted a politically, economically and culturally dominant section of India's population. Yet, within the intervening period, they have gradually fallen behind the rest of society. At present, despite being the numerically largest minority community, Muslims are economically, politically, socially and culturally backward. Low level of education is both a cause and a manifestation of this backwardness. The NSS has estimated that the literacy rate for Muslims living in urban areas is 69.8 percent compared to 79.8 percent for the total urban population, at the all-India level; for West Bengal, the figures are 66.6 and 82.2 percent, respectively (NSS, 2001). Another study

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