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Improving The Quality Of Bengali Education At The Primary Level

Serina Paik
Independent Researcher
B.A In Bengali

Abstract

Primary education is the foundation of human development, shaping a child's intellectual, emotional, and cultural identity. In Bengal, where the Bengali language is central to thought and communication, the quality of primary education in the mother tongue has immense importance. This paper explores the current state of Bengali education at the primary level, analyzing the key factors that influence learning outcomes such as curriculum design, teacher training, teaching methods, parental involvement, and the socio-economic environment. The study further examines government initiatives, the impact of modern technologies, and the challenges that continue to hinder progress. It concludes with a holistic discussion on how to strengthen Bengali primary education through inclusive, creative, and culturally grounded reforms that ensure both equity and excellence in early learning.

Keywords: Bengali education, primary level, teacher training, literacy, curriculum reform, NEP 2020, language learning.

Introduction

Education at the primary level forms the first step toward a child's lifelong learning. It is in these early years that children develop curiosity, social values, and language skills that remain with them throughout life. For millions of children in West Bengal and Bengali-speaking regions, Bengali serves not only as a medium of instruction but also as a bridge to cultural and emotional expression. The strength of primary education in the Bengali language therefore determines not only literacy levels but also the preservation of the region's linguistic and cultural identity.

Although enrolment in primary schools has increased considerably in the last two decades, the quality of learning remains uneven. Many children struggle with reading and comprehension even after completing several years of schooling. Reports such as the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) repeatedly show that a large percentage of students in rural areas cannot read simple Bengali passages by grade three. This gap between access and actual learning outcomes calls for a deeper examination of how Bengali primary education can be improved in both content and delivery.

The Present Scenario

The state of West Bengal has made commendable progress in expanding access to primary education. The establishment of thousands of government schools under the West Bengal Board of Primary Education (WBBPE) has ensured that nearly every child can enrol in a nearby school. Schemes such as the Right to Education Act (2009), mid-day meals, and Kanyashree have encouraged enrolment and reduced dropouts, especially among girls. However, the success of education cannot be measured only through numbers of students in classrooms. Quality remains the key concern, as many schools still suffer from shortages of trained teachers, poor infrastructure, and limited learning resources.

In rural districts such as Purulia, Bankura, and Jalpaiguri, multi-grade teaching is common, where one teacher handles several classes at once. Many schools operate with inadequate classrooms, minimal furniture, and limited access to libraries or digital tools. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the digital divide between urban and rural students. While some city schools continued online classes, rural students lost valuable learning time due to lack of smartphones or internet connectivity. The result has been a visible decline in language proficiency and comprehension skills among young learners.

Teacher and Pedagogy

Teachers are the backbone of primary education, and their training and motivation determine how effectively children learn. In Bengali medium schools, most teachers are dedicated but often lack continuous professional development opportunities. Pre-service training offered by District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs) provides a foundation, but regular in-service workshops and hands-on guidance are limited. Many teachers depend on rote-based teaching methods where memorization takes precedence over understanding. As a result, children learn to repeat words without fully grasping their meaning.

Language learning, especially in early years, requires an environment that stimulates curiosity and interaction. Children learn best when they listen to stories, recite rhymes, and engage in creative activities. However, the classroom culture in many schools still emphasizes completing the syllabus over nurturing creativity. Teachers often feel pressured by administrative duties and syllabus completion targets, leaving little time for individual attention. The introduction of the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) and the NIPUN Bharat Mission, with their focus on foundational literacy and numeracy, provides an opportunity to redesign training modules in Bengali and help teachers adopt more engaging and child-centered approaches.

Curriculum and Learning Materials

The Bengali primary curriculum has evolved over the years with attempts to make it more communicative and student-friendly. Yet, the implementation of curriculum goals often falls short due to outdated teaching practices and lack of engaging materials. Textbooks are sometimes too dense or repetitive, failing to connect with children's daily experiences. Many lessons emphasize grammar and memorization of definitions rather than comprehension, storytelling, and expression.

A more effective approach would involve integrating real-life situations, folk tales, poems, and stories that reflect Bengal's rich cultural heritage. The inclusion of Rabindranath Tagore's short stories, Sukumar Ray's humorous verses, and regional folk songs can make the learning process enjoyable and meaningful. Classroom assessment too needs to be more formative, focusing on observing how children read, speak, and write in Bengali instead of simply testing what they can memorize.

Digital learning materials, such as audio stories, animations, and interactive e-books in Bengali, can also enhance comprehension, especially for first-generation learners. However, access to such materials must be universal, not limited to privileged urban schools.

Socio-Economic and Cultural Influences

The quality of education is deeply linked with the socio-economic context of learners. In many parts of rural Bengal, children come from families where parents are daily wage earners or small farmers. These families may value education but are unable to support their children's studies due to illiteracy or time constraints. For many first-generation learners, schools become the only space where they are exposed to structured learning. This makes the role of teachers even more crucial, as they must compensate for the lack of academic support at home.

Cultural influences can either strengthen or weaken education. Bengali literature and traditions provide an abundant source of educational material that can stimulate imagination and creativity. Yet, there is often a disconnect between the cultural richness outside the classroom and the mechanical learning that happens inside. Reviving that connection through arts, music, and local culture can make Bengali education more holistic. Gender and economic inequality also continue to affect access and performance. While girls' enrolment has improved, many still face social pressures that limit their educational progression. A truly inclusive Bengali education system must be sensitive to these realities.

Government Initiatives and Policy Framework

The Government of West Bengal, along with the central government, has introduced several initiatives to improve primary education. Programs such as Sabooj Sathi, Kanyashree, and the Mid-Day Meal Scheme have addressed access and retention. Under the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan and NIPUN Bharat Mission, efforts are being made to achieve foundational literacy and numeracy by the early grades. The "Banglar Shiksha" portal and various digital initiatives are steps toward modernizing the education system.

However, implementation gaps remain significant. Monitoring and feedback mechanisms are weak, and there is little follow-up on whether training and digital tools actually improve classroom learning. Policy documents often promise innovation, but the translation of those ideas into practical classroom strategies requires consistent collaboration between administrators, teachers, and researchers. The NEP 2020 offers a new vision of education that emphasizes mother-tongue instruction, holistic development, and experiential learning. For Bengali primary education, this vision can only be realized through localized curriculum development, teacher empowerment, and investment in rural education infrastructure.

The Challenge of Learning Outcomes

Despite policy efforts, the central issue remains that many children fail to acquire basic reading and comprehension skills in Bengali by the time they complete the primary stage. This has long-term implications for learning in other subjects as well. When children cannot understand what they read, they lose confidence and interest in school. Low learning levels also perpetuate social inequality, as children

from privileged backgrounds can supplement their learning through private tuition or parental guidance, while others lag behind.

The problem is not the language itself but the way it is taught. Bengali, as a rich and expressive language, offers enormous potential for creative learning, yet this potential remains underutilized. Pedagogical reforms that focus on comprehension, storytelling, and local experience can reverse this trend. The success stories of schools that use activity-based learning, theatre, and group reading sessions show that children learn faster and remember better when education becomes interactive and joyful.

Future Directions for Improvement

Improving the quality of Bengali education requires a combination of teacher motivation, curriculum reform, community participation, and digital integration. Teachers should be empowered as professionals who can experiment with new ideas rather than merely follow rigid syllabi. Schools should provide a nurturing environment where learning happens through play, art, and dialogue. Parents and community members can also play a larger role by participating in reading campaigns and school activities that promote literacy.

Technology, if used wisely, can bridge gaps rather than create new ones. The development of digital resources, mobile apps, and online platforms in Bengali can make quality learning materials accessible to both teachers and students. However, this should complement, not replace, the human connection that is central to effective primary education. The state must also ensure that schools are adequately funded, regularly monitored, and provided with resources to maintain a high standard of instruction.

Conclusion

The improvement of Bengali education at the primary level is essential for both academic progress and cultural preservation. The early years of learning are the most formative, and it is during this time that children develop their linguistic and cognitive foundation. A high-quality Bengali education system can create confident, creative, and culturally rooted individuals capable of critical thinking and social responsibility.

For this to happen, the system must move beyond the idea of schooling as mere attendance. It must focus on meaningful learning, joyful classrooms, and inclusive pedagogy. Empowered teachers, supportive policies, active communities, and a curriculum that values both tradition and innovation can together transform the landscape of Bengali primary education. In the long run, the strength of a society depends on how it educates its youngest minds, and the quality of Bengali primary education will remain a true measure of that strength.

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