

Research Paper

Mainstreaming Education of Marginalized Children Through a Coherent Policy Framework- A Study in North Bengal

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ABSTRACT

The National education policy 2020 places a strong emphasis on the quality aspect of education. One of the criteria recommended by Viksit Bharat-2047 to transform India into a developed nation was equitable access to quality education. Despite various initiatives, the goal remains far from being reached. One of the reasons is the major regional disparities in the participation of marginalized children in mainstream primary education in India. So, the present study analyses the learning engagement of marginalized children and also the gaps in integrating marginalized children into mainstream primary education. The study also explores strategies to integrate disadvantaged students into mainstream primary schools and ensure quality primary education for them. The study was conducted in 16 govt. aided primary schools from the underprivileged areas of four districts of North Bengal region of West Bengal namely, Alipurduar, Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri and Plains of Darjeeling. 16 Head teachers, 32 assistant teachers, 80 students and 20 parents were chosen purposively. Classroom observation, self-made achievement test, semi-structured interview schedule are used to collect first hand data. The second-hand data were collected from existing govt policies, published documents in govt. websites, research reports and so on. Simple percentage analysis and narrative analysis were used. Our findings highlight that lack of socio emotional and cognitive engagement disrupts children's learning in schools. Moreover, teachers' incompetence, irrelevant curriculum, language barrier and socio-economic inequality have worsened the situation. Study reveals that a comprehensive and coherent policy framework will be effective, instead of one-sided policies, for the overall development of marginalized children.

Keywords: *Marginalized Children, Mainstreaming Education, Learning Engagement, Constraints and Coherent Policy Framework*

Primary education is a fundamental right and a crucial element of social equity in India. The National Education Policy, 2020 and the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) both emphasize inclusive and quality education for all, with a special focus on integrating marginalized populations into mainstream education. However, India has made tremendous progress in expanding access to primary education over the last two decades.

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But it has been found that regional disparities persist in spite of significant national advances, especially in geographically and socially marginalized regions like North Bengal, which is located in the northern part of West Bengal (Sengupta & Chakrabarti, 2024). Apart from various linguistic, and religious minorities, this region is predominately populated by Adivasis (Santhals, Oraons, Mundas), Rajbanshis, Nepalis, and tea garden communities (Islam & Siddiqui, 2020).

Studies reveal that despite several progressive policy frameworks, clear disparities remain in North Bengal in terms of access, retention, learning outcomes, and participation or involvement of children from marginalized communities (ASER, 2018; 2022). They face various interlocking obstacles to accessing and benefiting from schooling, including societal discrimination, poverty, child labor, language obstacles, seasonal migration, and poor school infrastructure (Ali et al., 2025). Studies have shown that children in the tea garden areas of Alipurduar and Jalpaiguri often fail to attend school during peak harvest seasons, while early marriage among girls and socio-religious restrictions continue to impede female participation in education in Malda and North Dinajpur (Saha & Sarkar, 2024; Roy & Chouhan, 2021).

The concept of mainstreaming marginalized children in primary education requires more than just enrollment figures: it also demands full involvement, social integration, quality education, and equal educational opportunities. Despite the increase in primary school enrollment, especially since the RTE Act went into effect in 2010, marginalized children continue to be disproportionately denied access to quality primary education. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2022 states that although more than 95% of children between the ages of 6 and 14 are enrolled in school, learning outcomes are still severely poor, particularly for those from underprivileged socio-economic backgrounds. Moreover, dropout rates are more prevalent among SC, ST and minority children, owing to socio-cultural stereotypes, child labor and a perception of education's irrelevance (Kingdon, 2020). One of the key issues is that primary education in North Bengal often fails to accommodate learners' diversity. Schools typically follow a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching and curriculum, leaving little room for innovative pedagogical methods or culturally responsive teaching (Rangarajan et al. 2022). Another major structural issue is the medium of instruction. Many tribal children grow up speaking Sadri, Kurukh but are taught in Bengali or English, leading to alienation and academic disengagement (Ali et al., 2025). Similarly, the lack of advanced pedagogical training and shortage of teachers, especially in remote tea gardens or border areas, exacerbate this disparity (Ghosh & Das, 2020). The curriculum often lacks cultural pertinence, and teaching approaches remain rigid, leaving behind children who learn differently or come from non-mainstream backgrounds (Abhishek & Indranil, 2023). Moreover, infrastructural disparities persist. In many government schools across North Bengal, basic facilities such as separate toilets for girls, boundary walls, ramps, and clean drinking water are either absent or inadequate, particularly in ST-dominated and migrant worker settlements (Ghosh & Das, 2020). These shortcomings disproportionately affect girls and children with disabilities, contributing to absenteeism and dropouts.

So, we can say that the issue is more than just school access; it is also about meaningful learning engagement, learning outcomes, and institutional accountability as well. Therefore, the researcher wants to analyze the gaps in integrating marginalized children into mainstream primary education of North Bengal. The researchers also want to explore

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strategies to integrate disadvantaged students into mainstream primary schools and ensure quality primary education for them.

Research objectives:

1. To study the learning engagement of primary students in the underprivileged areas of North Bengal.
2. To explore the constraints in bringing marginalized children into mainstream education.
3. To study the coherent policy framework for integrating marginalized students into mainstream education.

METHODOLOGY

The present study employed an exploratory research design in conjunction with a qualitative approach. All the Govt. aided primary schools of North Bengal, West Bengal are the population of this study. A total of 16 Govt. aided primary schools (4 schools from each district), located in the underprivileged areas of four districts of North Bengal region of West Bengal namely, Alipurduar, Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri and the plains of Darjeeling, are selected for the study. 16 head teachers/TICs, 32 assistant teachers, 80 students (5 students of class iv from each school) and 20 parents have been chosen purposively as a sample of the study. Classroom observation and a self-made achievement test have been used to collect the data about the learning engagement of students in the underprivileged areas. A semi-structured interview schedule is also used to collect the data from the HT/TIC, assistant teachers of the school, students and parents as well about the factors that constrained bringing marginalized children into mainstream primary education. Also, second hand data like existing govt policies, published documents in govt. websites and research reports were used to generate a suggestive coherent policy framework for integrating marginalized students into mainstream primary schools. Simple percentage analysis and narrative analysis techniques are used for data analysis.

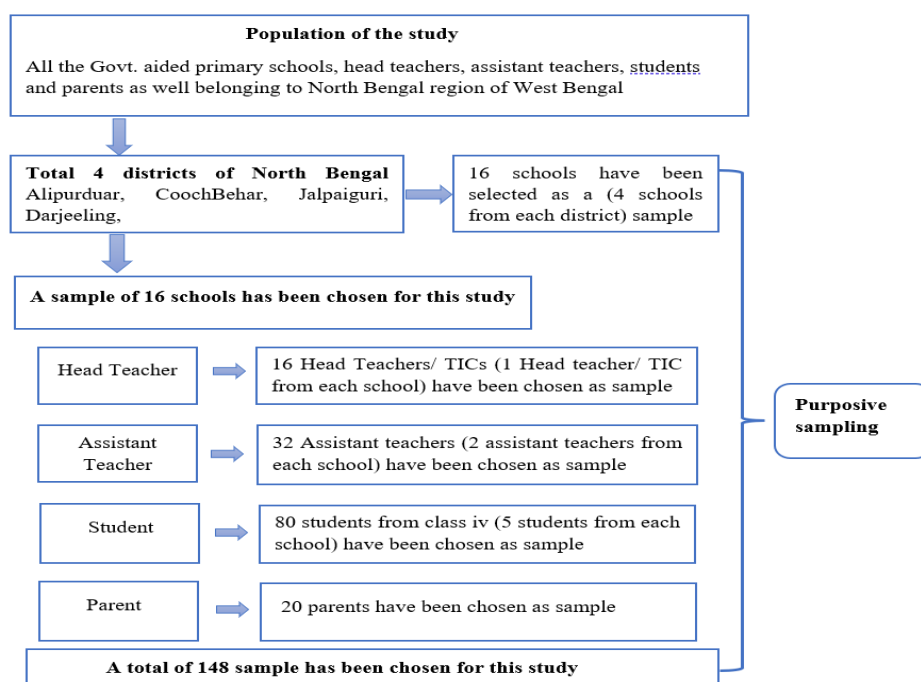


Fig 1. Sample and sampling technique

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Learning Engagement of Students

The researchers gathered data from two areas to understand the learning engagement of students. One is learning outcomes and another one is their socio-emotional, psychological and cognitive engagement in school.

Academic achievement

The researchers here used an achievement test to understand the students' present status of learning in English and mathematics, what and how much they are actually learning in school. The result shows that 40% of marginalized students of grade iv are unable to write their own names in English. They don't even know their own class roll numbers. It further shows that the majority of the students coming from underprivileged areas struggle to pronounce and understand the meaning of English words and sentences as well (ASER, 2018; 2022). Also, 60% of the students in Std iv. are unable to read Std iii. level English text. The ASER, 2022 report also highlighted that children's fundamental literacy levels have taken a big hit, with their reading abilities deteriorating much more swiftly and sinking to pre-2012 levels. This situation is not different in the case of mathematics. Most of the students in std iv have found to be able to answer std iii level addition problems, but they struggled when it comes to subtraction. It also appears that a large number of students in Std iv are failing to solve Std iii level multiplication and division. The ASER, 2018 report also noted that only 21% of third grade students could read or subtract second grade text.

Socio- emotional, psychological and cognitive engagement of students

The researchers tried to explore the learning engagement of students in Govt. aided primary schools of marginalized areas. The data were collected through classroom observations and interviews with the students, aiming to gain knowledge about their socio-emotional wellness, cognitive and psychological engagement. The study has shown that schools often fail to create a learning environment conducive to quality education (Chakraborty and Maiti, 2025). In most schools, it has been observed that when students are taught in the classroom, they just stare at the teacher with puzzled expressions, as if they do not understand anything. There is no interaction between them and the teachers. One student remarked, *'I don't like to come to school because I don't understand what the teacher teaches in class'*. They therefore, consider attending school as a monotonous affair (Mitra and Acharya, 2024). The data also revealed a lack of cognitive and psychological engagement among students in schools. In the classroom, students have been observed to act as passive learners throughout the entire teaching learning process. They don't even have the courage to ask the teacher a question that they don't understand (Ghosh and Bhowmik, 2024). A student was asked, "Do you get any help from your family with your homework?" The student said *"there is no one at home who can help me with my homework"*. It has also been observed that having students from several classes in the same classroom makes it more difficult for all students to follow the lessons. Some schools appear to have insufficient classrooms, while in others, even when there are classes, teachers bring all of the students into one room and teach them all together. Studies found that factors such as overcrowded classrooms, classroom climate, and insufficient pedagogical training of teachers have been identified as obstacles to building strong teacher student connections (Hossain et al. 2025, Majumder & Beri, 2025). So, it actually affects the quality of the entire teaching learning process.

Barriers to bringing marginalized children into mainstream primary education

There are many factors that constrain bringing marginalized children into mainstream primary education. These factors are shown below.

- **Gender norms & cultural beliefs:** It has been observed that Gender-based parental inequality continues to restrict girls' access to school and fosters detrimental gender stereotypes in marginalized communities (Yadav et al., 2022). They often remain at home to take care of their siblings and perform household activities. Because there is a conviction in the minds of parents that girls only belong in domestic roles rather in classrooms. They perceive spending money on girls' education as a waste of money. A parent said, *"What is the point of spending so much money on girls' education in a place where huge dowries are demanded for educated girls?"*
- **Absenteeism:** Absenteeism is a burning factor that ultimately contributes to the exclusion of many children belonging to marginalized communities. The regular attendance rate of students in schools in underprivileged areas has been found to be below 30 percent. So, the question also arises about the role of schools here. Schools contribute to exclusion by failing to monitor absence, seek for and identify patterns, and collaborate with families to understand the reasons behind it.
- **Non enrolment and drop out:** It has been found that the enrolment rate at primary schools located in underprivileged areas has been continuously falling over the last four years, while school dropout rates have been rising concurrently (Makwana and Elizabeth, 2022). Many factors contribute to this, including poverty, child labor, the school environment, language problems, and lack of parents' awareness and so on.
- **Socio-economic disparity:** The data shows that the financial burden of education discourages poor households from sending their children to school. A parent said, *"School is not for the poor, it's only for those who have money."* Because, despite being free, primary education still has unstated or implied costs, such as tuition, transportation, puja fees and so on.
- **Infrastructural constraints:** The majority of primary schools, particularly those in minority and tea belt areas, suffer from severe infrastructural limitations (Ghosh & Das, 2020). For example, many schools have not had enough classrooms, ramps, TLM and other amenities. Some schools have been found to lack separate toilets for boys and girls as well as a boundary wall around the school. Even though it exists in certain schools, it is not suitable for use. Thus, it raises concerns regarding children's safety, security and hygiene, particularly for girls.
- **Teachers' accountability:** Teachers' failure to provide effective and learner-appropriate pedagogical approaches, relevant curricular resources contribute largely to exclusion (Bhowmik et al., 2022). When teachers and curricula do not embrace diversity, children who are part of minority groups, speak a second language, or have cultural distinctions are left adrift and neither understood nor accepted. These are circumstances in which teachers do nothing and leave the students to play or go home. It raises the question of their professional accountability.
- **System of schooling:** When a school is academically rigid, controlling and punishing rather than encouraging children's understanding and active participation in learning, students are at risk of dropping out.
- **Pertinence of curriculum:** In primary schools, the socio-cultural milieu of marginalized communities is often not properly reflected in the curriculum. This irrelevant curriculum results in students' disinterests and stifling academic advancement (Nandi et al., 2024). The curriculum's effectiveness can be

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considerably increased by incorporating indigenous knowledge, languages, and cultural perspectives.

- **Language barrier:** Language barriers act as significant obstacles for marginalized students, particularly those from linguistic minority communities (Saha & Sarkar, 2024). When students' mother tongue is not used as the medium of instruction in schools, it frequently leads to issues with comprehension and affects academic achievement.
- **Non-inclusive approach:** Children from marginalized populations, including those with disabilities and from underprivileged backgrounds, require specialized educational support such as culturally responsive and flexible curriculum and customized pedagogy. However, infrastructure, skilled personnel, and inclusive education policies are often lacking to address these needs.

A coherent policy framework

The government of India has introduced several initiatives and interventions such as SSA, RTE act 2009, Mid-Day Meal Scheme focusing on access, equity and inclusion in primary education. The quality aspect of primary education has been neglected. The initial goal of education is to bring all the children into the school which was a big challenge for our country; however, mid-day meal was a successful attempt to raise the enrolment in school. Where the vision of Viksit Bharat - 2047 is to transform India into a developed nation by 2047, the universal enrolment is not sufficient, ensuring quality education for all children irrespective of their caste, region, religion and gender should be the central to the education policy. The systemic barriers that hinder the academic progress of marginalized children can be addressed by equitable access to quality primary education through developing culturally responsive curriculum, customized pedagogy and community engagement as a resource in teaching learning. Neither teachers, nor parents can alone change this scenario. It is a collective responsibility of all the stakeholders; therefore, SMC has a major role to play. But in West Bengal, WEC and VEC are the local bodies directly associated with the school management. Therefore, full participation & active involvement of local administrations, parents, teachers, local resource persons, and senior community members are necessary to ensure equitable access to quality primary education especially, for the underprivileged children. Harmonize various legal frameworks like, Right to Education Act, Right to Person with Disability Act to ensure children's participation and active engagement over mere integration.

Despite national policies, significant regional disparities exist in the inclusion of unprivileged children into mainstream primary education in India. These variations are driven by differences in socioeconomic factors, infrastructure, teacher quality, and policy implementation across states. So now, it is high time to adopt a coherent policy framework to eliminate these regional disparities. A coherent policy framework is a structured approach that ensures all related policies, programs, and actions across different govts or an organization are mutually supportive and work in harmony toward a common set of goals and principles such as inclusion as well as quality education. It requires a multi-faceted and coordinated approach across legislation, infrastructure, human resources, curriculum, and community engagement. For example, the Govt of India established EMRS schools specially students from ST communities to provide quality education from class 6 to 12. But there are less than 10 EMRS schools in west Bengal which is not sufficient to cover the marginalized areas of the state. There is no such school in West Bengal's Alipurduar district which is predominantly populated by Scheduled Tribes. Most surprisingly, the primary

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section is not included in these schools. So, there is a need to establish more such primary schools in every district of the state through a joint initiative of the central and state govt. It also demands teacher training that focuses on inclusive learning approaches and assures increased participation and good interaction among students from various backgrounds. According to NEP 2020, primary teachers must complete at least 50 hours of continuous professional development (CPD) training annually to improve their skills, knowledge and teaching practices. But studies show that the majority of teachers belonging to North Bengal have no knowledge or idea regarding CPD (Ghosh and Bhowmik, 2024). They further said that it is not applicable for state level primary schools. Thus, this shows that there is a regional disparity in policy implementation that needs to be addressed through a coherent policy framework. Also, many studies have shown that academic accountability of the authorized body plays a crucial role in ensuring quality education. But it seems to be neglected somehow in many areas of North Bengal. A head teacher remarks that “*The higher authorities are only concerned about the implementation of the mid meal day scheme. They do not seem to be concerned about learning. When they come to visit school, they only ask about the mid-day meal, not about how much the students are learning in school. However, education is the main purpose of the school. But they neglect that main aspect*”. Therefore, authorities need to take collective initiatives to solve this problem. Furthermore, local stakeholders, such as community leaders, NGOs, and civil society groups, need to be engaged in order to promote inclusive and sustainable educational development. Also, the government should take the initiatives to form an intensive monitoring system through a robust data collection process from marginalized areas with the aim to bridge the gap between policies and practices.

CONCLUSION

The academic trajectories of the children in underprivileged areas can be distinguished from the mainstream education in terms of socio-economic disadvantages, inadequate resources, qualified teachers and exposure to stressors. Students in marginalized areas have poor academic achievement. Apart from learning outcomes, their socio-emotional development is also thwarted. Government initiatives and policies failed to change the scenario. Rather, the decreasing number of students in government schools has led to the closure of many schools in marginalized areas. In the case of urban areas, the community itself acts as a supportive learning resource whereas, in marginalized areas, it hinders the learning path. Gender disparity, lack of parents’ awareness, language barriers and cultural beliefs are notable among these. Therefore, it is inevitable to mention that special attention must be paid to those areas for the academic progress of the students. Culturally sensitive curriculum and empowering community are the two significant issues for development of quality education that should be central to policy. Evidence suggests that poverty affects students’ performance; hence, the initiatives to poverty reduction should be the focus of government policy. The existing policies need to be reformulated considering the widely spread roots of lower academic achievements in marginalized areas. In this context, the coherent policy framework is considered effective to address the systemic barriers in bringing marginalized children into mainstream education.

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Conflict of Interest

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