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PRIMARY EDUCATION IN INDIA: A MICRO-LEVEL STUDY ON INFRASTRUCTURE, TEACHER ENGAGEMENT, AND STUDENT PERFORMANCE IN GOVERNMENT – AIDED SCHOOLS

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Abstract

In recent decades, education has increasingly emerged as a vital factor in the sustainable social, political, and economic development of developing countries. Policies of post-independence allowed private enterprises to contribute to the educational sector, in recent times, many such institutions have increasingly focused on mere profit-making. Meanwhile, government-sponsored educational institutions, particularly at the primary level, are often perceived to be declining in quality. This growing disparity calls for a thorough analytical study to explore the root causes of the deteriorating standards in government primary schools and to propose effective solutions. This micro-level study critically examines the condition of primary education in government-aided schools. The research focuses on two broad dimensions- the institutional infrastructure and administrative status of the schools, and the academic performance of students. The findings reveal notable infrastructural deficiencies such as inadequate classrooms, absence of clerical staff, and lack of ICT facilities, despite basic amenities like drinking water and electricity being universally available. Student performance analysis reflects poor learning outcomes. These results point to systemic challenges that require immediate policy attention and intervention.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, education has increasingly emerged as a vital factor in the sustainable social, political, and economic development of developing countries. Within the broader context of development, education plays a central role, functioning both as a means and an indicator of progress. It is a dynamic process of acquiring knowledge, skills, and values through structured learning experiences. Life is full of challenges and adventures, and education equips individuals with the tools necessary to navigate and overcome these complexities. Education is a human activity that occurs within society, and its goals are shaped by the nature and structure of the society in which it unfolds. It has the power to influence and shape socio-economic, cultural, and political dimensions, thereby acting as a transformative force within communities (Bhattacharaya, 2006). Education also serves as a mechanism for organizing individuals and groups into disciplined, stable, and cohesive units of society. While the aims of education may evolve over time, the process itself is continuous – making it a lifelong and never-ending journey. In this sense, education forms the very foundation of human civilization and societal progress. Being a dynamic concept, the meaning and purpose of education are subject to change across time and context. Various scholars have interpreted education from different perspectives. Etymologically, the term 'education' is derived from the Latin words *educare* and *educere*. While *educare* means 'to bring up' or 'to nourish,' *educere* means 'to bring forth.' Together, these root meanings suggest that education is the process of providing a nurturing environment that enables individuals to bring out and develop their innate potentialities (Jaypalan, 2008).

Education is often portrayed as the primary route to overcoming poverty; however, its effectiveness is hindered by bureaucratic hurdles and the growing inefficiency that tends to define state-managed public systems, including the education sector (Nambissan, 2014) (Marsh, 2011). Ensuring access to education, providing a supportive teaching-learning environment, implementing a relevant and well-structured curriculum, and fostering an inclusive and empowered teaching community. These four are essential prerequisites for a school system aiming to drive social transformation (Batra, 2005). In this regard, institutional

support and perspective on future planning, public expenditure and policy making etc. are intrinsic part fostered by the governmental mechanism. Education is the birth right of every human being, and it is the responsibility of the state, in which the individual belongs, to ensure that elementary education is accessible to all individuals. The significance of universal primary education was first recognized in the context of safeguarding the educational and cultural rights of minorities, which was seen as essential for the proper functioning of democracy (Ghosh, 2013). In light of this, the early policymakers of independent India incorporated a provision in the Constitution under Article 45 of the Directive Principles of State Policy. This provision prioritized education and led to the initiation of various programs aimed at improving the country's literacy rate, with the eradication of illiteracy becoming a primary educational goal. There has been a notable rise in the direct involvement of the central government in enhancing the infrastructure and delivery mechanisms of elementary education. This marks a significant shift, as the responsibility for providing public elementary education has traditionally rested almost entirely with state governments. While state governments still contribute the bulk of recurring financial resources, the Government of India has taken a more proactive role, particularly through the adoption of National Education Policies. Primary education in India, covering Classes I to V (ages 6–11), forms the foundational stage of the country's educational structure. It plays a critical role in shaping the cognitive, emotional, and social development of children. India committed, through its Constitution, to ensuring free and compulsory education for all children up to the age of 14 almost six decades ago. However, despite aiming to achieve this target by 1960, it still remains unfulfilled today (Govinda & Bandopadhyay, 2008). Over the decades, the Indian government has recognized the significance of this stage and has implemented a range of policies and programs to universalize and improve access, equity, and quality in primary education. To fulfil this mandate, flagship programs such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Mid-Day Meal Scheme, and the current integrated Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan have been launched. These initiatives aim to increase enrolment, reduce drop-out rates, enhance infrastructure, and improve the quality of teaching-learning processes.

Over time, with the vision of *'Education for All*,' the Constitution of India was amended to guarantee the right to free and compulsory education for all children between the ages of six and fourteen. The constitutional commitment to free and compulsory education was first articulated through the Directive Principles of State Policy (Article 45) and later made a fundamental right under Article 21A by the 86th Constitutional Amendment Act, 2002, which mandates free and compulsory education for all children aged 6 to 14 years. Importantly, this right emphasizes not only free and compulsory education but also stresses the need for quality education, irrespective of a child's social, economic, or cultural background. This constitutional guarantee is limited to elementary education and does not extend to secondary, higher secondary or vocational education. Nevertheless, policies of post-independence allowed private enterprises to contribute to the educational sector, in recent times, many such institutions have increasingly focused on mere profit-making. Since English education is viewed as a route to elite status and improved life opportunities, these schools have turned into arenas of intense competition and efforts to gain a positional edge (Nambissan, Private Schools for the Poor, 2012). Meanwhile, government-sponsored educational institutions, particularly at the primary level, are often perceived to be declining in quality. This growing disparity calls for a thorough analytical study to explore the root causes of the deteriorating standards in government primary schools and to propose effective solutions.

2. Review of Literature

A combined analysis of the works by (Bhattacharaya, 2006), (Sharma & Sharma, 2007), and (Pathak, 2010) reveals diverse yet fragmented perspectives on the Indian education system. Bhattacharya offers an in-depth exploration of the sociological foundations of education, focusing on aspects like social environment, culture, control, stratification, mobility, and change. However, his study remains confined to a sociological lens, neglecting psychological, philosophical, and economic dimensions, thereby making it partial. Sharma & Sharma provide a wide-ranging discussion of educational problems across all levels – pre-primary to higher education – while also addressing issues in adult education, women's education, education for SCs and STs, teacher training, and political influences on education. Although broad, their work is primarily problem-focused and lacks a theoretical or global comparative framework. In contrast, Pathak presents an accessible and comparative overview of the Indian education system, including global trends and the role of education in growth and sustainable development. He also compares Indian and international educational agencies but fails to establish a clear link between education and economic development and does not adequately articulate India's contemporary educational vision. Collectively, these studies highlight a significant gap- the absence of an integrated and interdisciplinary approach that connects sociological, political, administrative, and economic dimensions of education with India's broader developmental goals and global educational trends. This calls for further research that constructs a holistic framework to analyse the interconnections between education and economic development, assesses India's evolving educational vision, and evaluates the role of both state and private sectors in delivering inclusive and quality education.

3. Objectives of the Study: The present study aims to critically examine the current state of primary education in government-aided schools, with a particular focus on infrastructure and digital readiness. The specific objectives are:

i. To assess the present status of primary education in government-aided primary schools.
ii. To evaluate the availability and quality of infrastructure for facilitating an effective teaching-learning process.

4. Research Questions: In alignment with these objectives, the study seeks to address the following research questions:

i. What is the present condition of primary education in the selected area?
ii. Is there adequate infrastructure to support ICT for effective teaching and learning?
iii. What are the major challenges facing the primary education in general?

5. Methodology

Research Design: The study adopts an empirical and descriptive-analytical research design. It aims to analyse the prevailing condition of primary education using existing facts and field data. The approach is primarily descriptive, focusing on real-world observations and empirical insights, supported by critical evaluation and interpretation of data collected.

Sampling Technique: A purposive random sampling method was employed to ensure a representative and unbiased selection of schools and students. Out of 17 government-aided primary schools in the GP, 16 were included in the study. Additionally, 30 students from Class IV, drawn from the selected schools, were chosen for academic testing and interview to provide a well-rounded understanding of the situation.

Sources of Data: The study is based on both primary and secondary sources:

- **Primary data** were gathered through structured interviews using two sets of questionnaires—one tailored for students and another for teachers.
- **Secondary data** were obtained from various government publications, official websites, census reports, academic journals, and relevant scholarly books.

Field of Study*:* As a focused micro-level study**,** the research is geographically confined to Chakchaka Gram Panchayat of Cooch Behar district of West Bengal. This GP comprises the full universe of the research area.

About Study Area: The present study has been conducted in the Chakchaka Gram Panchayat (GP), located within the Cooch Behar-II Block of Cooch Behar District, West Bengal. This Gram Panchayat has been purposively selected for the research due to its proximity to the district headquarters, which ensures better access to administrative support and resources. Notably, two mouzas (revenue villages) of this GP are recognized as Census Towns (CT), reflecting a semi-urban character with relatively advanced infrastructural development compared to typical rural settings.

Chakchaka GP benefits from strong transportation and communication networks, enabling regular supervision and control by district-level education departments. This offers an ideal setting to observe how administrative proximity and infrastructure impact educational outcomes. The area also reflects a balanced social composition, with nearly equal proportions of unreserved and Scheduled Caste (SC) populations, alongside a visible presence of Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities. Such demographic diversity makes the location suitable for understanding how social factors influence educational attainment in primary schools. According to recent district-level educational statistics retrieved from district website (*http://coochbehar.nic.in/Htmfiles/Education_inCoB.html#pry_edu*):

- Cooch Behar District has 1,833 primary schools, 94 high schools, and 159 higher secondary schools.
- Cooch Behar-II Block, in which the study area falls, contains 210 primary schools, 11 high schools, and 21 higher secondary schools.
- Chakchaka GP, the specific focus of this study, comprises 17 primary schools and 2 higher secondary schools, but no high school.

The schools in Chakchaka GP cater to a total of 1,403 students, with boys accounting for 49% and girls 51% of enrolment, reflecting gender parity. There are 59 teachers, of whom 68% are male and 32% female, leading to a student-teacher ratio of 24:1, which is in line with the national norms set by the Right to Education Act (2009).

The primary schools in Chakchaka GP display a favourable gender distribution in student enrolment, with a near-equal number of boys and girls in school. However, there is a noticeable gender imbalance among the teaching staff, with a higher proportion of male teachers. The student-teacher ratio of 24:1 is adequate and suggests that the schools are sufficiently staffed to provide focused attention to students. This GP thus offers a diverse and well-connected yet educationally challenged environment, making it an appropriate micro-level field site for exploring the status of primary education, infrastructural conditions, teacher deployment, and the effectiveness of ICT integration in government-aided primary schools.

6. Analysis & Findings

Data for this study were collected using two distinct sets of questionnaires. The first set was designed to gather information on the administrative structure, infrastructure, and available facilities in the government-aided primary schools. The second set aimed at assessing student learning levels and academic performance through basic response-based evaluations. For clarity and effective interpretation, the collected data have been analysed and discussed under two key thematic sections- I) Institutional Infrastructure and Administrative Status of Government-Aided Primary Schools, and II) Student Learning and Academic Performance. This division allows for a comprehensive understanding of both the systemic strengths and gaps in physical and administrative provisions, as well as the actual learning outcomes of students at the micro level.

6.1 Institutional Infrastructure and Administrative Status of Government-Aided Primary Schools

Facilities

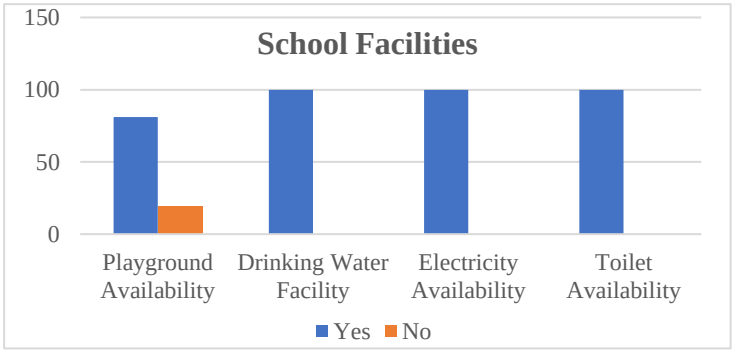
Playground Availability: 81% of the primary schools in Chakchaka GP have a playground, indicating that most schools prioritize providing physical spaces for recreation and sports. This is important for the overall development of students, as playgrounds

not only offer physical activity but also contribute to mental and social growth. However, 19% of schools lack playgrounds, suggesting that there is a need to improve recreational infrastructure in some institutions.

Drinking Water Facility: The availability of drinking water in all schools is reported to be 100%**,** which is a positive sign. Access to clean and safe drinking water is essential for students' health and well-being, and the fact that all schools provide this facility ensures that students' basic hydration needs are met.

Electricity Availability: Similar to drinking water, 100% of the schools in the area have electricity, which is crucial for ensuring that educational activities, especially those involving technology, can be conducted smoothly. This also supports lighting and ventilation, which are necessary for a conducive learning environment.

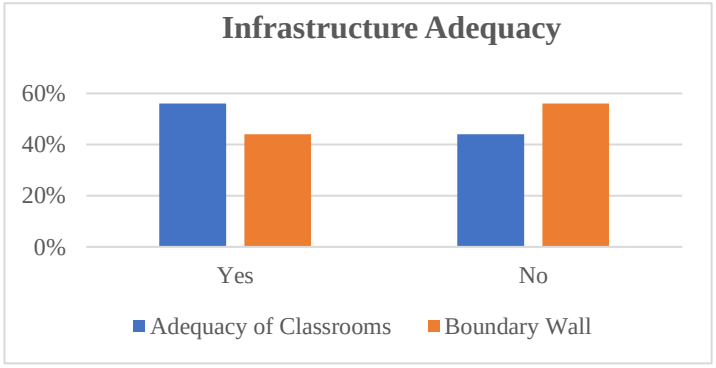
Toilet Availability: The availability of toilets is also 100% in all schools. This indicates that the schools provide basic sanitation facilities, which is vital for the health and hygiene of students. It also promotes gender-sensitive policies, as separate toilets for boys and girls are often necessary to ensure that female students are comfortable and can attend school regularly.



Infrastructure Adequacy

Adequacy of Classrooms: 56% of the schools report that their classrooms are adequate, while 44% say they are not. This indicates a significant proportion of schools face challenges related to overcrowding or insufficient classroom space. Adequate classrooms are critical for effective teaching and learning, and the lack of sufficient space could potentially hinder the quality of education in these schools.

Boundary Wall: Only 44% of schools have a boundary wall, while 56% do not. A boundary wall is an essential feature for ensuring the safety and security of students and the school premises. The absence of a boundary wall in over half of the schools suggests a security concern that may need to be addressed to ensure the safety of children and to prevent unauthorized access to the school grounds.



Staff, Administrative and Departmental Oversight

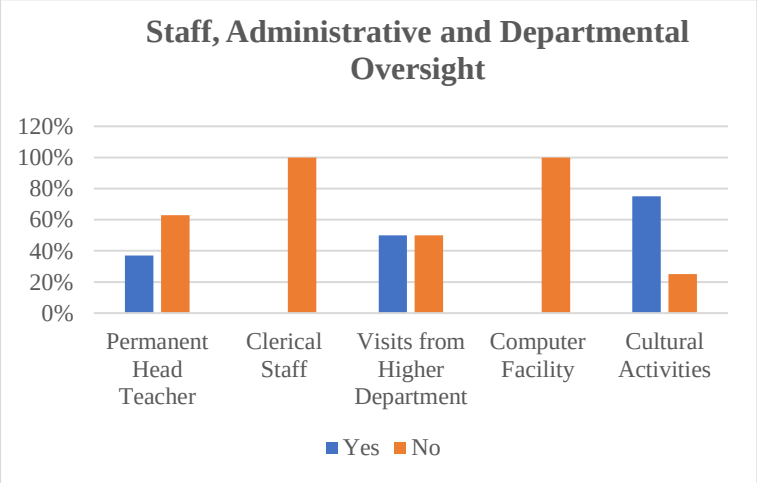
Permanent Head Teacher: 37% of the schools have a permanent head teacher, while 63% do not. The lack of a permanent head teacher in the majority of the schools can lead to issues related to school management, decision-making, and leadership continuity. A permanent head teacher is crucial for effective administrative functioning and for maintaining a consistent learning environment.

Clerical Staff: None of the schools have clerical staff, with 0% reporting the presence of administrative support. The absence of clerical staff could result in administrative inefficiencies, such as delays in documentation, record-keeping, and communication with other educational authorities. This suggests a need for better administrative staffing to support day-to-day school operations.

Visits from Higher Department: 50% of the schools report regular visits from higher authorities, while the remaining 50% do not. Regular visits from higher departments ensure that schools comply with educational policies and receive necessary guidance and support. The lack of regular visits to half of the schools could indicate a gap in administrative oversight and support, which could affect the schools' performance and development.

***Computer Facility**:* Similar to clerical staff, 0% of the schools have computer facilities. In the current era, access to technology is essential for both teaching and learning. The absence of computer facilities in all schools indicates a significant gap in terms of digital education infrastructure, which limits the ability to integrate Information and Communication Technology (ICT) into the teaching-learning process.
Cultural Activities: 75% of the schools perform cultural activities, while 25% do not. This indicates that most schools in Chakchaka GP emphasize extracurricular activities, which are essential for holistic student development. Cultural activities contribute to students' creative expression and social cohesion. However, a quarter of the schools do not engage in such activities, which may limit students' opportunities for extracurricular learning.

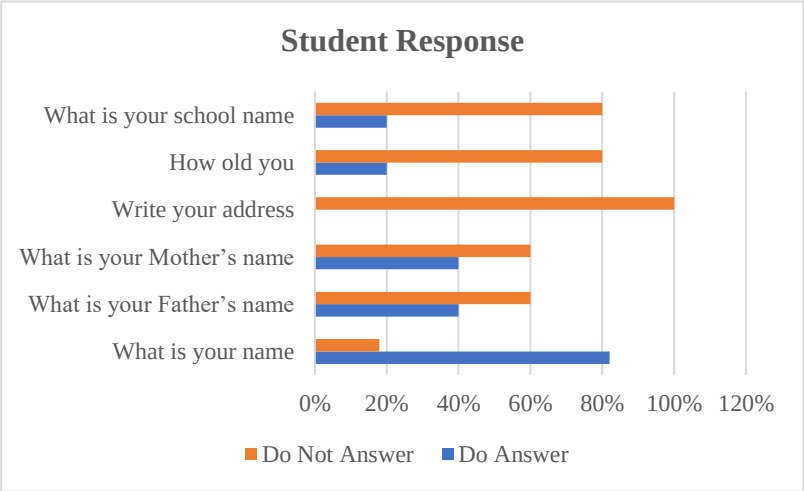
The provision of basic facilities like drinking water, electricity, and toilets in all schools is a significant positive aspect. These essential services ensure that the schools meet minimum health and safety standards. A notable concern is the 44% of schools that report inadequate classrooms, which could contribute to overcrowded conditions and affect teaching quality. This needs attention to ensure better learning environments. The absence of boundary walls in more than half of the schools and the lack of a permanent head teacher in a majority of schools indicates administrative and security challenges. These factors need to be addressed for better school management and safety. While most schools perform cultural activities, the 25% that do not miss out on a valuable part of student development. Expanding extracurricular engagement could benefit students' social and emotional growth. The absence of clerical staff and computer facilities in all schools points to significant administrative and technological deficiencies. These gaps could hinder the smooth functioning of schools and limit students' access to modern educational tools and resources.



6.2 Student Learning and Academic Performance

From the respondent 82% of the students were able to correctly answer the question "What is your name?" This high percentage suggests that the majority of students have a clear sense of their identity, which is a fundamental piece of information for children at this age. However, 18% were unable to answer, which might be attributed to factors such as temporary memory lapses or language barriers. Only 40% of the students were able to correctly answer the question "What is your father's name?" In contrast, 60% could not provide the correct answer. This low success rate could point to issues such as unfamiliarity with parental information, possibly due to non-engagement or lack of interaction with parents. It may also reflect difficulties in communication or comprehension among a significant portion of the student population. Similar to the previous question, only 40% of students were able to correctly answer "What is your mother's name?" and 60% were unable to do so. This result is consistent with the findings for the father's name, suggesting potential gaps in parental engagement or a lack of awareness of basic personal information. This also underscores the importance of family involvement in the education process. Among the respondent no students were able to correctly write their address. This is a particularly concerning result, as knowing one's address is an essential life skill, particularly for students of this age group. The inability to answer this question may be indicative of a lack of awareness of their home address, possibly due to of parental guidance, or inadequate focus on such basic skills in the educational environment. Only 20% of the students were able to correctly answer the question "How old are you?" while 80% could not. This is a significant gap, as children should generally be aware of their age by the time they reach Class IV. The low percentage of correct responses might suggest issues like, lack of emphasis on personal information in early education. It could also reflect detach connection between the students' school environment and their home environment, where such basic information may not be reinforced. Similarly, only 20% of students were able to correctly identify their school name, and 80% could not. This result is quite concerning, as students should be familiar with the name of their school. The inability to answer this question could point to a lack of engagement or a low level of attachment to the educational institution, possibly influenced by factors such as irregular attendance, lack of school-related reinforcement at home, or inadequate teacher-student communication.

The responses reveal that a significant proportion of Class IV students are unable to answer basic personal questions, such as their parent's names, their own age, or their school name. These results suggest potential issues with basic knowledge retention, communication, or engagement both within and outside the school environment. The low percentage of students able to answer questions about their parents' names and addresses could indicate a lack of parental engagement in their children's education. This might reflect socio-economic challenges, family dynamics, or limited support from caregivers to help children with basic education at home. The inability to write their address or answer questions about their age or school may point to a lack of emphasis on foundational life skills, which are essential for students' personal development. This might be indicative of gaps in the primary education curriculum or teaching methods that fail to reinforce such basic, yet critical, information. The responses from Class IV students in this survey reveal significant gaps in basic knowledge and personal awareness. The low success rates for questions related to family, age, address, and school name suggest a need for improved focus on fundamental life skills and personal engagement both in the classroom and at home.



7. Conclusion

The data collected from the primary schools in Chakchaka GP of Cooch Behar, West Bengal presents a concerning overview of the current state of primary education in the region, highlighting significant challenges in both infrastructural and academic areas. While most schools in the GP appear to have basic amenities like drinking water, electricity, and toilet facilities, there are considerable deficiencies in other areas. The infrastructural shortcomings, such as the lack of boundary walls and insufficient classrooms, suggest a need for more investment in physical resources to ensure a conducive learning environment. In the surveyed schools absence of clerical staff and computer further points to organizational weaknesses. These deficiencies in infrastructure and staff management can hinder the overall educational experience for students and limit the school's ability to provide quality education. The data from Class IV students reveals significant gaps in their basic knowledge and personal awareness. The significant gaps in basic knowledge among students, especially in personal identification and academic fundamentals, reflect a pressing need for stronger emphasis on foundational skills. The facts that unable to write their address and could not answer questions related to their age, parents name and school name highlights a troubling lack of engagement with essential personal information. These gaps in basic knowledge and life skills raise concerns about the effectiveness of the education system in preparing students for basic life challenges. Furthermore, the student-teacher ratio is relatively good in terms of numbers, yet this does not necessarily translate to better learning outcomes if other factors, such as the quality of teaching and engagement, are not addressed. A positive aspect is that several schools conduct cultural activities, which can provide students with valuable opportunities for creativity and community engagement. However, the low level of regular visits from higher department officials and the absence of clerical and computer staff points to a lack of adequate monitoring and support from educational authorities. To sum up, while there are some positive aspects to the educational scenario in Chakchaka GP, such as the availability of basic facilities and occasional cultural activities, the overall picture suggests the need for significant improvements. The infrastructure, administrative support, and student engagement require urgent attention. Focusing on addressing these challenges – through increased governmental support, better infrastructure, teacher training, and stronger parental involvement – can contribute significantly to improving the quality of primary education in this region.

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