

School Education in Tripura: Issues and Development

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Abstract: *The school education system in Tripura is substantially dependent on government initiatives and interventions, as there are no major private role-players in the education industry. The hilly terrain and underdeveloped communication are a major drawback for easy accessibility to smart education for the students in rural and hill areas. As unemployment is the main concern, the state education department serves as the chief recruiter in the state. Legal boundaries of the state power are often ignored to address the issue of unemployment, which has finally caused the loss of jobs in large number by order of the Apex Court resulting into socio-economic disaster to the lives of the jobless teachers and also created a vacuum in current education machinery. The political change in the state has also resulted in a major reform in school education, which has been termed as 'Nutan Disha' or 'new outlook' of the Govt. The preparedness and policy of the govt in Post-COVID-19 education and development is still in vague and the Govt. is trying to experiment with new ideas for the new challenges, the outcome of which is still veiled in future.*

Keywords: *Nutan Disha, Sadhana & Prerana, Ektu Khelo Ektu Poro, NISHTHA, Bochor Bachao Abhiyan, Empower U – Shiksha Darpan, Neighbourhood Classes.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Tripura, the historical *Manikya* kingdom of ancient India with its root in the epical period of the *Mahabharata*, is the third smallest state of India in terms of area and eighth in terms of population. Surrounded from North, West, and South by 856 KM long International boundary with Bangladesh, Tripura is the home of around 40,23,000 citizens (Estimated Population 2018-19) including 31.8% tribal population. The Department of School Education records enrolment of 7,41,376 students from Pre-primary level to H.S.+2 State as on 30th September 2018 which is almost 18.43% of the State population. The public education system at School level in Tripura is managed by the Department of Education (School) headed by a Principal Secretary under the direct supervision of Minister of Education (School), who is a Cabinet Minister in the Government of Tripura.

The two main arms of the department are the Directorate of Elementary Education, which is involved in the organization and management of Junior Basic (Class I to Class V) & Senior Basic (Class I to Class VIII) schools, and the Directorate of School Education, which is the main authority for policy formulation of overall School Education system in general, and involved in the organization and management of High Schools (Class VI to Class X) and Higher Secondary Schools (Class VI to Class XII) specifically.

The department also incorporates under its aegis the State Council of Educational Research and Training, Directorate of Kokborok & other Minorities Languages, SSA, RMSA & SLMA.

For Secondary and Higher Secondary level curriculum and board examination, all public schools under Govt of Tripura and private schools which are registered under their respective Directorates, are regulated by the Tripura Board of Secondary Education, and independent state agency founded in 1973 through an act passed by Tripura Legislative Assembly.

As on 30th September 2018, total 4945 schools are operating in the state including 2578 JB Schools, 1245 SB Schools, 669 High Schools and 453 Higher Secondary (+2) Schools, which were manned by 46,909 teachers.

Termination of services of 10323 teachers:

The Govt of Tripura recruited 10323 teachers (advertised in 2002, 2006 & 2009) through a recruitment process called 'Roster System.' According to the Govt, the basis of the selection was Need-cum-Seniority-cum-Merit.

Tripura High Court was established on 23 March 2013, and this recruitment was challenged in the High Court on the following grounds – (i) though advertised before RTE Act, 2009, the actual recruitment process was conducted after enactment of the RTE Act, 2009, & (ii) The so-called Need-cum-Seniority-cum-Merit based Roster System violated the RTE Act & NCTE Guidelines, as no requirement for B.Ed/D.El.Ed. or no TET qualification was observed for this process.

In 2014, Tripura High Court ruled this recruitment as unconstitutional and terminated the services of 10323 schoolteachers. The State Govt challenged this judgement in Supreme Court, but the apex court also did uphold the HC verdict in March 2017.

Meanwhile, on 17 January 2015, Teachers' Recruitment Board, Tripura (TRBT) was established as per the RTE Act, 2009 & NCTE Guidelines and TRBT is conducting TET examination since 2017. But, as this process is too much lengthy, the SC allowed the Govt to continue with the 10323 teachers on Ad Hoc basis till 31st March 2020.

A portion of 10323 teachers was already selected through New Recruitment Policy (clearing TET & having B.Ed/D.El.Ed) and 8882 among them (who were working on Ad Hoc basis) did get jobless on 31st March accordingly.

At the present situation, though having teachers' recruitment through TRBT since 2017, the state school education department is suffering from scarcity of teaching professionals because of termination of 8882 teachers in a single day.

Government Initiatives:

The hilly state in North East India was ruled by the Left Front Government since 1993. In March 2018, the political scenario changed expressively as the power was shifted from Left to Right, under the BJP Govt. The present Biplab Kr Deb administration is trying to take some major reformative steps in the Educational system, the result of which can only be evaluated in future. This overall process of changing the education system of the state with the changing of a political era has been termed as '**Nutan Disha**'. Some of these steps are –

The department will identify the schools with less student strength, which have another school with adequate infrastructure. The schools with lesser student count will be merged with the bigger one. The Govt will provide the students with a special allowance for coming to their new school.

The basic idea here is to shut down less utilized schools and use the staff strength for optimum utilization at the centralized schools. 'Less in number, more in quality' is the guiding principle here.

The textbooks designed at State level have been abolished. The NCERT books are directly being translated into Bengali (which is one of the official languages in Tripura). These books are distributed for free from Class I to Class VIII students under RTE Act, and the new textbooks are in use from 2019 session.

From 2019, the academic session for all classes has been changed from January to December to April to March. As the 2018 session ended in December 2018 and 2019-2020 session was to start from April 2019, the School Education Department started Special Remedial Classes from January 2019 to March 2019 for ensuring equal growth of underprivileged students especially in Rural Areas and TTAADC areas.

Bochhor Bachao Abhiyan:

The State never accepted 'No Detention Policy' as it is according to the RTE Act. The present government has modified the policy to some extent. According to the new policy, there will be no detention for Class I, II, III, IV in Primary Level & Class VI & VII in Upper Primary Level. But for Class V, VIII, and above strict evaluation and detention policy will be followed. However, if any student at those levels fails to achieve required marks for passing the exam, the HM/School Teachers will take immediate steps for remedial classes and re-examination within two months and have to make sure that the student qualifies for the next term.

This policy has been named as *Bochhor Bachao Abhiyan* in Bengali which means 'Save the Year Drive'.

Empower U – Shiksha Darpan Mobile App:

The School Education department has launched an Android App, which is mandatory to be installed by all personnel under the department. Resume and Academic Profile of every teacher is registered in this app & the School Education Directorate can directly instruct the teacher by using this platform. For teachers, Leave Management, Transfer/Posting related issued, Grievances even Lesson Plan and e-contents will be managed through this app. They are required to upload attendance of students in their classes and Marks of various exams through this app. Thus, digital management in the education system is currently in practice in Tripura.

Sadhana & Prerana:

Another recent development in Education policy of Tripura Govt is the introduction of Sadhana and Prerana scheme. The HM & teachers must identify the students lagging and needs special attention. Those pupils who do not have any basic idea about the required level of knowledge according to their class have to be categorized as falling under 'Sadhana' fellows. Those who have some idea about their required level of knowledge, but still below the average, are to be categorized as 'Prerana' fellows.

After identification of Sadhana and Prerana fellows, the HM will divide them equally among the available teacher strength, and each teacher has to look the disciples personally, even after usual school hours, who are listed under him/her and make the student able to cop up with a required level of knowledge according to his/her class.

The teacher must report the development of the student, when the student promotes from Sadhana level to Prerana level in the Empower U – Shiksha Darpan App.

Academic Coordinators & Key Resource Persons:

The School Education Department has also appointed Academic Coordinators and Key Resource Persons (KRPs) in each of the eight districts of the state under the District Education Officers (DEOs). The Academic Coordinators and the KRPs will frequently visit

schools and check the authenticity of reports submitted by teachers on up-gradation of their students from Sadhana and Prerana.

NISHTHA:

The MHRD, Govt of India has launched the National Initiative for School Heads' and Teachers' Holistic Advancement on 16 July 2020. The Academic Coordinators & KRPs are the key players in implementing this mega training project for building competencies among all teachers and HMs at Elementary level. The achievement of the state in this mission is as follows –

Table 1: *Training Details under NISHTHA*

	Target	Achieved	Percentage	National Percentage
SRPLs	43	42	97.67%	73.06%
KRPs	215	173	80.46%	70.69%
Heads/Principal	34	912	2682.35%	49.13%
Teachers	30681	22648	73.81%	43.43%

Source: <https://itpd.ncert.gov.in/mss/nishthadashboard/dashboard.php>

The state percentage of target achievement is much higher than the national average. Especially the training of Heads/Principals has crossed the target dramatically to 2682%, which is even greater than Arunachal Pradesh (1574%) & Sikkim (225%).

Use of Digital Platforms:

Keeping in mind the COVID-19 Pandemic, all the training under NISHTHA scheme are being conducted through online mode. The KRPs and Academic Coordinators are imparting training to their fellow teachers through **Google Meet**. Using of **WhatsApp** for online classes and formation of official groups at State, District, Inspectorate & School level are in practice to gear up communication and share e-contents to the teachers and learners. The **Empower U – Shiksha Darpan** Android app is also playing a vital role, as it keeps a vigil on the activities of the teachers and students simultaneously by the directorate itself.

Tackling the COVID-19:

Education is a continuous and lifelong process. As our lives cannot stop due to any pandemic, so is education. The Govt has taken some special student-friendly policies keeping in mind the current pandemic.

Ektu Khelo, Ektu Poro:

'Ektu Khelo, Ektu Poro' is a term coined by Ratan Lal Nath, the Minister of School Education, which means 'Play a little, read a little.' As due to Coronavirus pandemic the schools are under lockdown, the teachers are providing home tasks to students which are partially related to their study, but which mostly includes extra-curricular activities. A teacher may ask his/her student to sing a song, or recite a rhyme which he/she likes, or draw a painting and the student will do the task and share with his/her teacher through WhatsApp. The idea behind this initiative is that, as the students are locked inside their homes due to COVID Pandemic, they are devoid of usual social contact with their friends in schools and also devoid of games and plays they use to enjoy and participate in their school grounds. Therefore, teachers will not only give a task to their students, but the philosophy behind this attempt is the psychological wellbeing of the students.

Introduction of Workbook:

In a recent Press Briefing, the Education Minister has introduced two types of 'Workbooks' to be provided free of cost to every student of Class III to V & Class VI to VIII. These Workbooks are different from conventional textbooks or notebooks, as they are activity-based and interactive. The basic aim of these workbooks is to develop mathematical and linguistic skills in the students by providing examples and giving them challenges to complete on their own.

As the students are unable to visit their classes due to lockdown, these will help them to keep the habit of studying alive while enjoying their home environment.

Neighbourhood Classes:

Another initiative taken by the School Education department is the introduction of Neighbourhood Classes. In this initiative, the teacher will visit the locality of the students and hold a class at their vicinity. The preferred place for such class will be inside a park, or a temple, which has natural surroundings. Maximum five students can join a class by a teacher in that natural set up, and proper social distancing must be maintained by all of them. Masks, Hand sanitizers are to be used and the teacher will answer their queries and help them solve the problems they are facing in the self-study at their homes, as elaborative teaching is not possible in those short meetings.

The most amazing part of this initiative is that joining a Neighbourhood Class is not mandatory for the students. He/she can only join the class if he/she desires to have the same and guardian's consent is also necessary. The teachers are also free from any target of organizing certain numbers of neighbourhood classes. They can organize a meet only if his/her students require one.

2. CONCLUDING REMARKS:

In a democratic polity, the education system reflects the ideas of the democratically elected ruling parties. Before 2018, the major policy of the Communist Party-run government was to address the issue of unemployment and poor economic growth in Tripura due to scarcity of resources and remoteness from mainland India. Thus, the state formulated the Need-cum-Seniority-cum-Merit formula which eased the way of recruiting tens of thousands of unemployed youth inside the education machinery, being the largest job-provider in the state. But as the state policy of recruitment came into conflict with the Federal laws, the Courts of law terminated those jobs creating a huge vacuum in the public educational apparatus and also creating opportunities for eligible youths serving as nation-builders, irrespective of their political affiliations. As since 2018, Tripura became a state run by a National Party, i.e. BJP, the main motive of the government is to enforce the national standards at the state level, which resulted into the changes in textbooks, academic calendar, and implementation of New Recruitment Policy which was free from political judgementalism.

However, the socio-economic issues of the terminated 8882 teachers and their family members are remaining in dark, and no social scientific probe into their lives has been initiated till now, not by the administration, nor by the academia.

The recent reforms in the education sector by the state government can not only be assessed as a quick response to COVID-19 pandemic situation, but also a reflection of changing political scenario. With reduced manpower and less developed infrastructure in an economically backward state, will the public education machinery be able to address the emerging issues of Post-COVID-19 education and development, requires more attention from the intelligentsia.

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