

## **RTE SCORES LOW WITH TEACHER ASSOCIATIONS**

**By  
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Civil society advocates often accuse teacher unions of being too consumed in demanding greater personal benefits and parrying attempts at accountability, to play any constructive role in the education sphere. I beg not.

The politician-teacher nexus is much criticised and not without reason. Research in West Bengal indicates that teacher associations do have strong political linkages. While some leaders maintain that their organisations are apolitical, some admit that their members could be members of political parties in their personal capacities. Others admit that some members of teacher associations mobilize support for election candidates from parties with which they share a common ideology. This dependence of politicians on teachers, according to a 2009 study by Tara Beteille, helps protect the latter from teacher-unfriendly policies.

Despite these linkages the teachers associations still have a number of complaints against the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education 2009 (RTE Act) which they have been unable to influence. As important stakeholders in education it is necessary that the associations' concerns about RTE be heard and given due credit.

Except the Bengal Primary Teachers' Association (BPTA), which opposes the Act 'in the main', the associations view the RTE Act positively. However, they point out certain provisions as faulty such as the Act providing education only for six to fourteen year olds and not to all between zero and eighteen. The provision that allows out-of-school children, to seek admission to the age appropriate class has also irked teachers. They do not believe it is possible for say a thirteen year old without any basics to cope irrespective of special training. Similarly, they object to Section 15 of the Act, which allows students to seek admission at any time of the year. The no-detention-rule, despite being already present in primary classes of West Bengal also faces opposition. While not in favour of the pass-fail system the associations believe that a system of incentives is

required.

The associations criticise Section 12 for reserving 25 percent seats in private unaided schools for underprivileged kids from the neighbourhood. Ignoring that the state has only 44 government schools in West Bengal in the first place, they believe that the government is opening up education to commercialisation. The Sara Bangla Association does not think that disadvantaged children will be able to adapt themselves to the different culture in these schools. They are equally opposed to Sections 18 and 19 which stipulate that schools (other than those run by the government), failing to meet the requisite norms need to shut down within three years. This they believe will leave a number of teachers and students in the lurch.

Some associations are enraged at the 45-hour week. The associations also object to the level of centralisation that the Act creates as well as the curriculum framework and norms for schools being homogenous across states.

Section 21, describing the formation of School Management Committees invites varied criticisms. The associations think that parents, especially the ones from the lower strata of society would be unable to commit time. Others opine that the little representation that the teachers enjoy (one-third of 25 percent membership strength) does not commensurate with the role that they play in running the school. Moreover, the committees may be open to political interference with members of the local authority finding representation.

Some of the concerns may indeed be pertinent whereas some may not. Irrespective, it is essential to involve more teachers as stakeholders in the formulation of state specific rules to ensure that teachers take ownership of this Act and implement it to their best of ability. It is also important to encourage the associations to use their reach to spread awareness about the Act. This is especially important considering that the success of the RTE Act may hinge on this factor.