



Elementary Education in South 24 Parganas Districts of West Bengal: A Regional Analysis of Status and Challenges

Dr. Jhuma Halder

Vidyasagar College, Kolkata

Abstract

Elementary education forms the foundation of the educational system and plays a crucial role in shaping human development. South 24 Parganas, one of the largest and most diverse districts of West Bengal, presents a mixed picture in this regard. Despite significant expansion in school infrastructure and enrolment, the district continues to face several challenges in achieving universal completion of elementary education. Problems such as high dropout rates, shortage of teachers, inadequate school facilities, and demographic pattern of the district affect the learning process. Geographic difficulties, particularly in riverine and coastal areas, further limit access to schools. This study finds that despite following the no-detention policy, a good number of pupils repeat primary classes. The average dropout rate being high at elementary level, it needs to be checked, without which neither the goal of universal elementary education can be achieved. Many blocks, especially the forested and remote ones, show high dropout rates and low completion rates.

Keywords: Dropout, Completion Rate, Access to Education, Educational Challenges

1. INTRODUCTION

Elementary education has long been regarded as the base of human development and social progress. In India, the constitutional commitment to universal elementary education reflects a deeply rooted belief that the future of the nation is shaped in its classrooms, especially at the primary and upper-primary stages. The major Policies and Programmes of Elementary Education in India, starting from Constitutional provisions to National Education policies (1968, revised 1992), District Primary Education Programme (DPEP, 1994), Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA, 2001), Right to Education Act (RTE, 2009) reflects a gradual shift from access to enrolment to retention and learning outcome.

From Independence to the last census (2011), India's literacy rate showed a steady and significant rise. At the time of the first Census in 1951, only about 18 per cent of the population was literate and by 2011, literacy had increased to 74 per cent. The literacy rate among Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes from 1961 to 2011 also reveals a steady rise. However, both groups continue to lag behind the overall literacy rate (in 2011- SC Literacy Rate: 66.1 percent and ST Literacy Rate: 59.0 percent).

At the same time, enrolment in elementary schools expanded dramatically. With the introduction of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), several scholars observed improvements in enrolment and retention, especially at the primary level (Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2010). Studies indicate that incentives like the Mid-Day Meal Scheme and free textbooks positively influenced attendance and short-term retention, particularly among SC and ST children (Drèze & Kingdon, 2001). On the other hand, several studies highlighted that although enrolment expanded rapidly after Independence, retention remained weak, particularly among children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Tilak, 1994). The PROBE Report (1999) identified poverty, child labour, seasonal migration, and parental illiteracy as key reasons for early school leaving, especially in rural and marginalised communities.

1.1. Background of the Study Area

The district of South 24 Parganas covers almost 9 per cent of the total landmass of the state of West Bengal. Located between latitudes 20°20' N and 20°06' N and longitudes 88°20' E and 88°60' E, the district is bounded to its south by the Bay of Bengal, by Bangladesh across the Raimangal and Kalindi rivers to its east, by Kolkata and North 24 Parganas districts to its north-west and north-east respectively and by the districts of Howrah and East Medinipur across the Bhagirathi river to its west.

South 24 Parganas (Figure 1.1) is a large district that stretches from Kolkata city to remote riverine villages near the Bay of Bengal. Owing to its vast size and large population, the district administration faces a dual set of challenges. Urban areas face the problems of metropolitan life, such as high population density and overstretched civic infrastructure, while rural and coastal regions suffer from inadequate transport and communication networks along with weak service delivery mechanisms.

The district comprises five subdivisions, which are 1. Baruipur, 2. Canning, 3. Diamond Harbour, 4. Kakdwip and 5. Alipore Sadar. Alipore is the district headquarters. There are 29 development blocks, 7 municipalities and 312 gram panchayats in this district. The Sunderbans area is covered by thirteen CD blocks, viz. Sagar, Namkhana, Kakdwip, Patharpratima, Kultali, Mathurapur-I, Mathurapur-II, Jaynagar-I, Jaynagar-II, Canning-I, Canning-II, Basanti and Gosaba. This district contains 37 islands. Other than the municipality area, each subdivision contains community development blocks, which in turn are divided into rural areas and census towns.

Because a vast stretch of the district is covered by dense mangrove forests, South 24 Parganas naturally divides itself into two distinct geographical regions: the forested blocks that lie deep within the Sundarban mangrove landscape, and the non-forested blocks which are influenced by the cosmopolitan culture of Kolkata metropolis. This division shapes not only the land but also the lifestyle of people, accessibility, and development across the district.”

1.2. Objective

The objective of the present paper is:

- To examine the prevailing condition of elementary education and to analyse the factors responsible for the low completion rate of the elementary education cycle.

1.3. Data and Methodology

The study is based entirely on secondary data collected from published government sources, including the Census of India reports, District Information System for Education (DISE/UDISE), and statistical handbooks of West Bengal. The data cover key indicators such as enrolment, dropout, completion rates, literacy rate, teacher availability, and demographic characteristics across blocks of South 24 Parganas district.

For analysis, both descriptive and inferential statistical methods have been employed. Descriptive techniques such as percentages, ratios, and averages are used to examine trends and spatial variations, while z-score analysis is applied to identify relative levels of dropout and completion across blocks. Further, Pearson's correlation analysis is used to assess the relationship between dropout rates and selected socio-demographic and institutional variables.



Figure. 1.1

2. Results and Discussion

2.1. History, Culture, and the Growth of Education

The district of South 24 Parganas has a rich history. The archaeological evidence shows that the Gupta rule made a deep cultural impact on the district. 'The imperial Guptas were the patrons of Puranic Brahmanism. Through them, Puranic Brahmanism, and its associated culture spread over this region. Many terracotta icons of Puranic Brahmanical Gods and Goddesses have been found from the Berachampa- Deganga-Chandraketugarh region and from Atghara. Some Buddhist icons have also been found' (West Bengal District Gazetteers, 1994).

From ancient times up to at least the sixteenth century, numerous *Jana padas* flourished along the banks of the old Bhagirathi channel. Among them were Kalighat, Boral, Rajpur, Mahinagar, Baruipur, Baharu, Joynagar, Majilpur, and Chatrabhog. Baruipur was a thriving and populous city during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. In 1538, the Portuguese build settlement in Santgaon on the confluence of the river Saraswati and Bhagirathi-Hooghly. 'In this period, Bengal's political geography was dominated by the so-called Baaro Bhuniyas (twelve landed Chiefs). The Portuguese free-booters became the allies of these independent Bhuniyas against the Mughals and in return got freedom of action in this lower part of Bengal.' (HDR, 2009). British colonial rule over the region continued without interruption until India's independence in 1947. During British rule, modern education, and social and religious reform movements etc spread in the district. 'There were many renowned centres of Sanskrit learning in the medieval and late medieval periods. Majilpur was called the 'second Navadwip' for its profound studies and culture of the Hindu sastras. Harinavi, Rajpur, all were famous centres of learning' (HDR, 2009). Many English schools were established in Baruipur, Boral, Govindapur, Bahru, and Joynagar under Hindu management. Many journals were published within the district in the nineteenth century.

The Tebhaga Movement began in this district to improve the condition of sharecropping peasants, with Kakdwip and Namkhana as its main centres. Later, in 1967, West Bengal witnessed a massive peasant uprising across the state. 'The epicentre of the movement was the Kheyadaha Gram Panchayat of the Sonarpur block. This paved the way for successful land reform in West Bengal after the Left Front came to power in 1977' (West Bengal District Gazetteers). The area was covered by a thick mangrove forest. Between 1873 and 1939, much of the interior blocks of Sandeshkhali, Kakdwip, Patharpratima, Basanti, Kultali and Gosaba had been cleared for human settlements. The forest boundary took a further clearing after India's independence due to the Partition of Bengal. Between 1951 and 1971, this area was forced to accommodate a huge influx of refugees from East Pakistan (Bangladesh) and some forested islands were cleared for human settlement. In 1986, 24 Parganas was subdivided into North and South divisions mainly to reduce the administrative burden. In 1986, the district of South 24 Parganas had its district headquarters in Alipore which itself is in Kolkata. It then comprised two subdivisions—Alipore (Sadar) and Diamond Harbour consisting of 29 blocks.

2.2. Economy and Socio-cultural Aspect of the District

In South 24 Parganas, dependence on non-farm employment is higher in blocks near the Kolkata metropolis, while dependence on agriculture and allied activities increases toward the southern parts. Although the district remains largely rural, agriculture is no longer the primary livelihood source. As per the 2011 Census, only 36 percent of workers were engaged in agriculture. The main crops include rice, sugarcane, timber, and betel nut, which primarily sustain the local rural economy. Additionally, horticulture and floriculture have emerged as important supplementary occupations.

The Bay of Bengal significantly contributes to the economy of South 24 Parganas. The confluence of the Ganga and the sea creates ideal conditions for pisciculture, with Canning serving as the main fish trade hub. This fishery plays a vital role in sustaining the district's economy. At present, the tourism industry has developed significantly in the southern parts of South 24 Parganas. It is concentrated around destinations such as the Sundarbans, Sajnekhali, Bakkhali, Frazerganj, Henry Island, and Diamond Harbour. The Sundarbans has been declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The District Human Development Report of South 24 Parganas by the Development and Planning Department, Government of West Bengal (2009) reveals that in the block Basanti 65 per cent of households were poor in 2005, making Basanti one of the poorest blocks in the whole country. Kulpi and Canning-II, blocks also have high poverty ratios of 53 per cent and 50 per cent, respectively. The poverty rates are very high in the Sundarban region also. The Report also reveals that a large section of the population in the district cannot fulfil the most basic

human requirements like food, shelter, and clothing. In Sonarpur block, which is literally a stone's throw away from one of the largest and fastest developing metro cities in India, about 14 per cent of the households live in hunger.

2.3 Demography

The total population of the district is 81, 53,176 which was 8.61 percent of the total population of West Bengal according to the 2011 census. The decadal growth rate of population between 1991 and 2001 was 20.85 per cent and in between 2001 to 2011 it is 18.05 percent which is higher than the state average of 13.93 per cent. The decadal growth rate for South 24 Parganas has been fluctuating in the last 50 years of 1951-2001 (Fig. 1 .1). In the rural areas the growth rate has declined from 29.59 in 1951-61 to 17.45 in 1991-2001, while in the case of urban areas it has come down from 54.85 in 1951-61 to 43.31 during 1991-2001. The percentage of the child population to the total population of the district increased from 17.22 in 1981 to 19.00 in 1991, and it has come down to 4.18 percentage points to 14.82 in 2001. This would indicate that the decline in the decadal growth rate for this district is basically due to a fall in the birth rate. In 1984, the district was divided into two parts: south and north, due to population pressure, resulting in a decline in population growth rate (Figure 2.1).

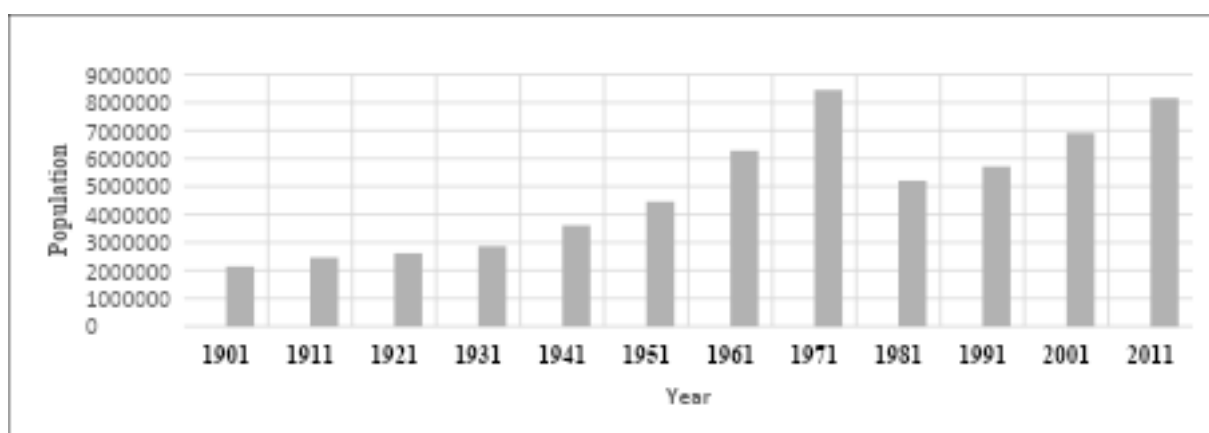


Figure 2.1: Decadal Growth of Population in South 24 Parganas (1901-2011)

Source: Census, 2011

South 24 Parganas is a district with varying population density. The overall population density is 694 persons /sq.km. Though a large part of the landmass of the district is classified as forest area and falls under the Sundarban Tiger Reserve, the population density is staggeringly high in Sadar, Diamond Harbour and Baruipur subdivisions, with the highest concentration expectedly in Sadar Sub Division and the lowest in Kakdwip Sub Division. Among the blocks, Budge Budge-I has the highest population density at 3764 per square kilometre, while Namkhana has the lowest at 433. The high population pressure in most areas of the district puts an enormous burden on the amount of land available for cultivation and existing infrastructure.

Nearly 84 percent population of the district lives in the rural areas, where development is taken care of by the panchayat bodies. The remaining 16 percent population is looked after by the Kolkata Municipal Corporation and seven municipalities. If we see the distribution of population by age group (Fig. 1.2), the highest percentages are found in the 10–14 age group, where males make up 10.33 percent and females 10.38 percent. Close behind is the 15–19 group at 10.18 percent for males and 10.38 percent for females, and the 20–24 group at 9.82 percent and 10.37 percent, showing that roughly one-tenth of the population falls into each of these young cohorts.

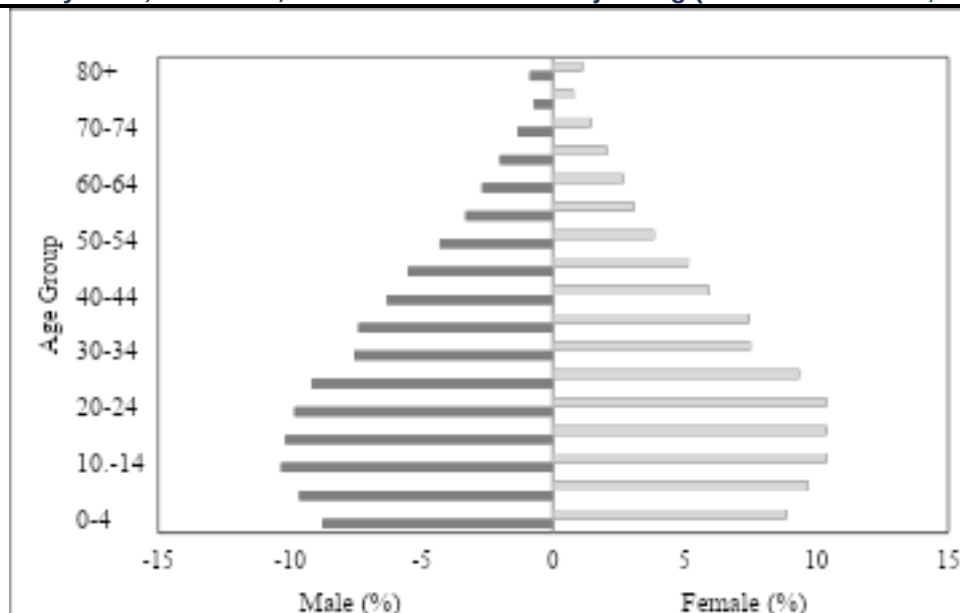


Figure 2.2: Age-Sex Structure of South 24 Parganas District, 2011

Source: Census, 2011

The scheduled caste comprises 32 percent and the Scheduled Tribe comprises 1.23 percent of the total population. The percentage of the Muslim population is also high, that is, 33.24 per cent of the total population. So, the social identity-wise share of population in South 24 Parganas is more or less equally distributed among the Scheduled Caste, Muslim and General caste population. According to the District Human Development Report, 2009, more than 50 per cent of the people living in Canning Subdivision belong to the Scheduled caste or Scheduled Tribe communities. Among the blocks, Canning-I, Sonarpur and Gosaba have a majority of the population belonging to these communities.

2.4. Literacy Rate

Education, as articulated in the National Policy on Education (1986), is a “dynamic, cumulative, lifelong process providing diversity of learning opportunities to all segments of society.” The power of education always helps to develop an economically prosperous society. The literacy rate in South 24 Parganas, as per the Census 2001, is higher than the literacy rate of West Bengal. The district recorded a higher decadal percentage point increase in literacy from 55.10 per cent in 1991 to 70.16 per cent in 2001. According to the Census report (2011), the literacy rate in the district is 78.57 percent. The male literacy rate of 84.72 percent is predictably higher than the female literacy rate, which is 72.09 percent. The literacy rate is below the national average among the ST and Muslim populations. The proportion of overall female literacy, particularly among the scheduled tribe population, is very low (29.88 per cent) in this district.

Table 2.1: Literacy Rate: The State and the District

State/ District	Literacy Rate (Excluding 0-6 Population) in %									% Point Change in Literacy Rate during 2001-2011		
	1991			2001			2011			Total	Male	Female
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female			
West Bengal	57.7	67.81	46.56	68.64	77.02	59.61	77.08	82.67	71.16	8.4	5.6	11.55
South 24 Parganas	55.1	68.45	40.57	69.45	79.19	59.01	78.57	84.72	72.09	9.1	5.5	13.08
										2	3	

Source: Census, 1991, 2001 and 2011

(Table 2.1) shows that there is progress in female literacy. The female literacy rate in 1991 was far below the state average, but there is an almost 13 percent point rise in the female literacy rate during 2001 to 2011 in the district. The change in male literacy (5.53 percent) is far below the change in the female rate. The overall change is 9.12 percent.

So far as the blocks of the district are concerned, the blocks of the Sundarban region, excepting Sagar and Namkhana, are the worst performers in terms of literacy. All 5 worst-performing blocks were in the Sunderban region. These blocks are Canning II (66.51 percent), Basantai (68.32 percent), Kultali 69.36 percent), Jaynagar II (69.70 percent), and Canning I (70.76 percent).

Figure 2.3 shows the gender gap in literacy rate measured by male-female differences.

In the Forested Sundarbans blocks, male literacy significantly exceeds female literacy by 13 to nearly 20 percentage points. Among all the blocks, Kultali shows the largest gap (19.9 percent), suggesting particular gender-based barriers to female education. Even blocks with relatively higher overall literacy (e.g., Gosaba) maintain a gap of 15+ points.

The lowest difference is found in the blocks near the metropolis, like Bhargar II (7.37 percent), Thakurpukur-Maheshtala (8.92 percent), Budge Budge I (9.49 percent) and Budge Budge II (9.09 percent).

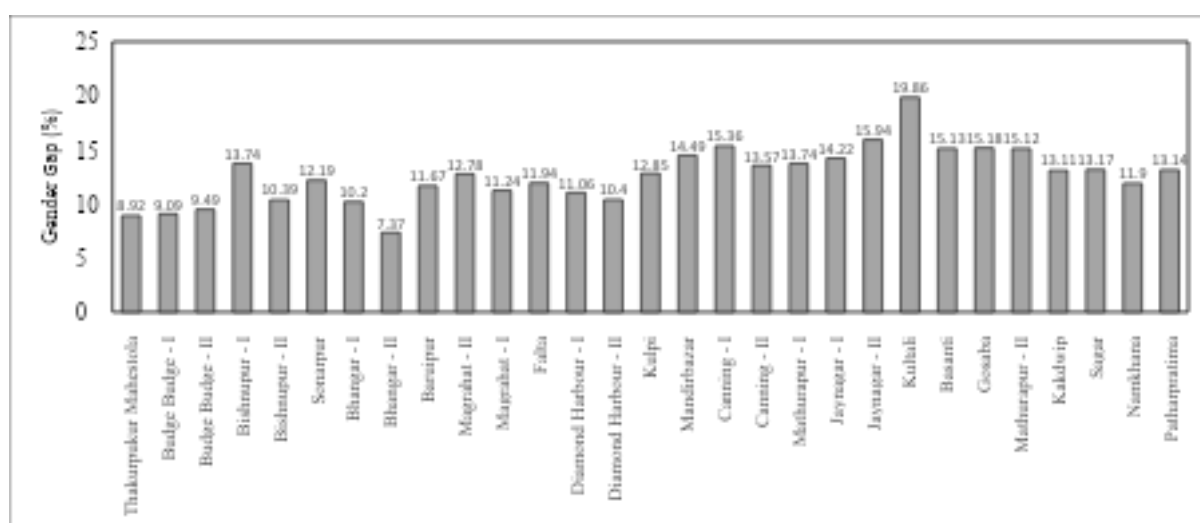


Figure 2.3: Gender differences in Literacy Rate: 2011

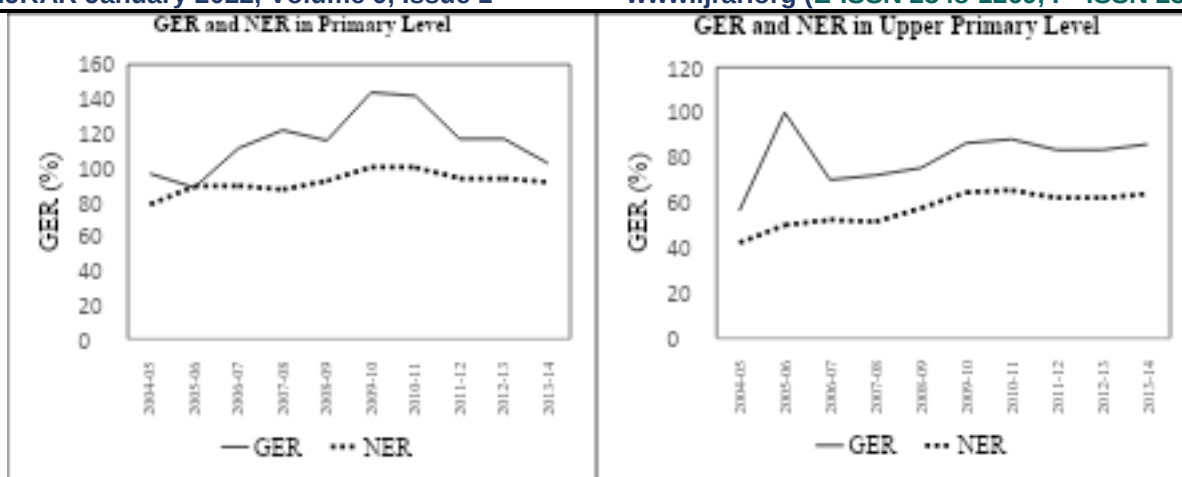
Source: Census, 2011

3. Challenges and Prospects of Elementary Education in South 24 Parganas

3.1. Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) and Net Enrolment Ratio (NER)

There was a clear progress in the district in enrolment at both primary and upper-primary levels over time. At the primary level, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) rises sharply after 2006–07 and even exceeds 100 in several years, peaking around 2009–10 and 2010–11. This indicates the inclusion of over-age and under-age children in schools, reflecting improved access and outreach. The Net Enrolment Ratio (NER) also improves steadily, reaching 100 in 2009–10 and 2010–11, suggesting near-universal enrolment of children in the official age group, though a slight decline appears after 2011–12.

At the upper-primary level, both GER and NER remain consistently lower than primary, highlighting transition and retention challenges. However, a gradual upward trend is visible, with GER increasing from 56.4 (2004–05) to around 86–88 (2010–11), and NER rising from 42.2 to nearly 64 by 2013–14 (Figure 3.1).

**Figure: 3.1: GER and NER in Primary and Upper Primary Level**

Source: District Report Card, DISE, 2013-14

3.2. Girls' Enrolment in Schools

Although a clear gender gap persists in literacy rates, school enrolment does not reflect the same disparity. Girls' enrolment is almost equal to that of boys at the primary level and even exceeds boys' enrolment at the upper-primary stage. This indicates substantial progress in narrowing the gender gap in education across both regions (Table 31.1).

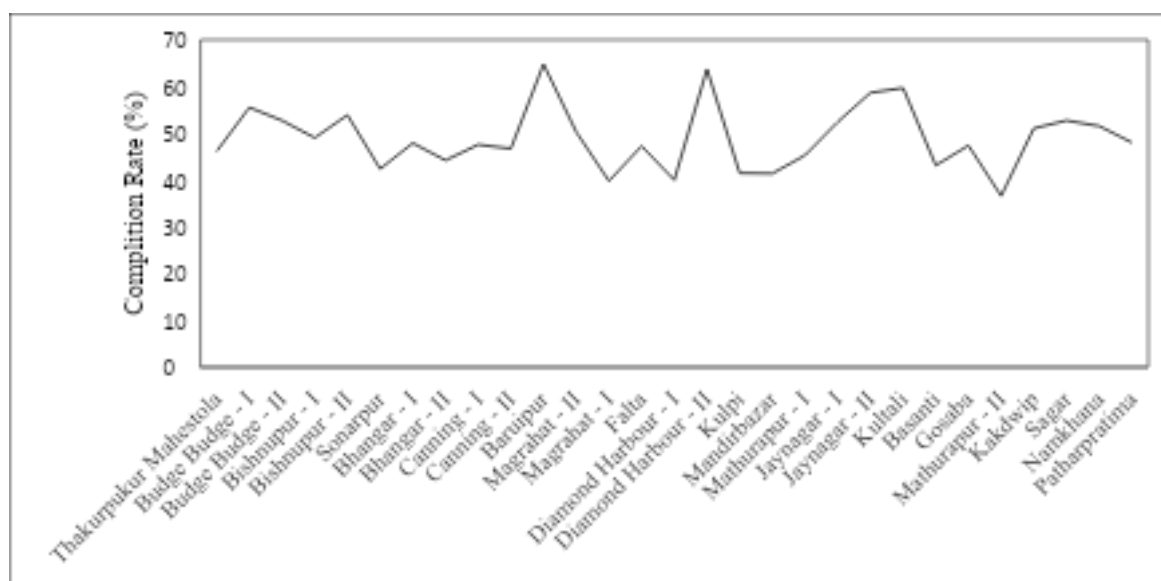
Table 3.1: Gender wise Enrolment across South 24 Parganas District

Level	Boys	Girls
Primary	50.76	49.24
Upper Primary	47.00	53.00

Source: District Report Card, DISE, 2013-14

3.3 Completion Rate

The completion rate across the 29 blocks shows considerable spatial variation, indicating uneven retention within the elementary education system. Rates range from a low of 36.6 percent in Mathurapur-II and 39.8 percent in Magrahat-I to a high of 64.78 percent in Baruipur and 63.71 percent in Diamond Harbour-II, revealing sharp inter-block disparities. Most blocks record completion rates below 55 percent, suggesting that a large proportion of students fail to complete the elementary cycle.

**Figure: 3.2: Completion Rate at Primary Level**

Source: District Report Card, DISE, 2013-14

3.4. Dropout Rate

The district records a high overall dropout rate, with forested blocks showing higher dropout at both the primary (16 percent) and upper-primary (21 percent) levels compared to non-forested blocks (Appendix Table 4.4). Despite the implementation of the *no-detention* policy, repetition rates remain alarmingly high. The Z-score analysis of primary-level dropout rates brings out a clear spatial pattern of inequality across forested and non-forested blocks.

Most non-forested blocks, except two, record negative Z-scores, indicating below-average dropout rates and relatively better retention at the primary level. Blocks such as Bhangar-I (-1.86), Budge Budge-I (-1.25), Baruiapur (-0.93), and Thakurpukur-Maheshtala (-0.86) show notably low dropout. Magrahat-I (2.43) and Magrahat-II (1.36) blocks show high positive Z-scores, pointing to acute dropout problems despite being non-forested. Forested blocks display greater variability and a higher concentration of positive Z-scores, indicating relatively higher dropout rates. Blocks such as Canning-II (1.68), Canning-I (1.41), Kultali (1.12), and Joynagar-II (1.01) show above-average dropout, reflecting the challenges of remoteness, fragile livelihoods, frequent environmental hazards, and limited educational infrastructure typical of forested regions. However, there are some of the blocks like Sagar (-1.46), Kakdwip (-0.64), and Namkhana (-0.52) that perform better than average, indicating the interventions of local and community engagement.

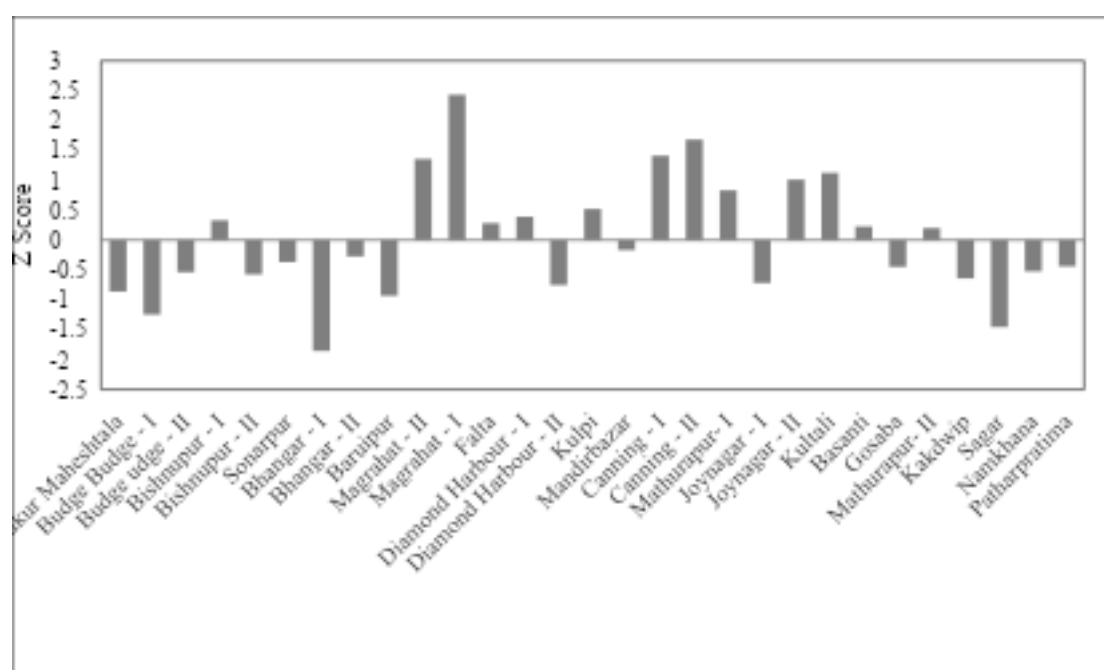


Figure: 3.3: Z-Score Distribution of Primary Level Dropout Rates Across Blocks

Source: Author's calculation, District Report Card, DISE, 2013-14

The Z-score analysis of upper-primary level dropout rates also reveals sharp contrasts among forested and non-forested blocks. Most non-forested blocks record negative or low positive Z-scores, indicating below-average to near-average dropout at the upper-primary level. Blocks such as Sonarpur (-2.09), Diamond Harbour-II (-2.08), Baruiapur (-1.52), and Bishnupur-II (-1.40) show very low dropout, reflecting comparatively stronger retention. Forested blocks exhibit higher variability and a stronger concentration of positive Z-scores, pointing to above-average dropout rates at the upper-primary stage. Canning-II (2.06) emerges as a critical hotspot, with dropout well above the district mean. Kultali (1.61), Mathurapur-I (0.96), Basanti (0.82), Patharpratima (0.68), and Kakdwip (0.57) also record high dropout levels.

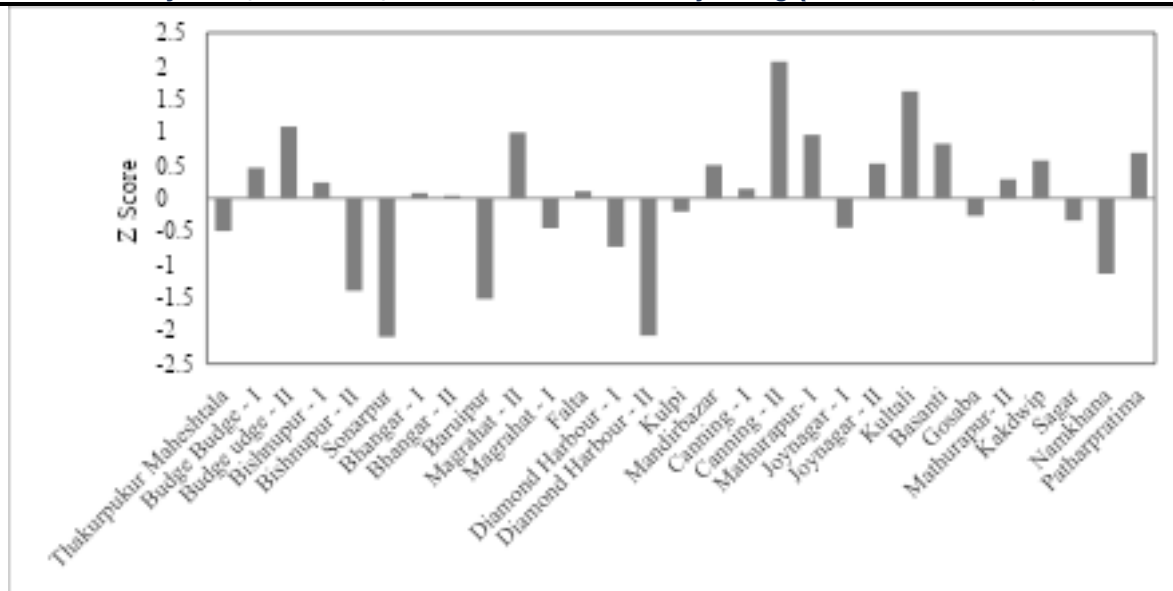


Figure: 3.4: Z-Score Distribution of Upper Primary Level Dropout Rates Across Blocks

Source: Author's calculation, District Report Card, DISE, 2013-14

3.4.1. Analysing factors influencing dropout rates

The determinants of dropout were examined using Pearson's correlation analysis to understand the relationship between literacy rate, demographic characteristics, and educational infrastructure.

A moderate and statistically significant negative correlation is observed between dropout rate and literacy rate ($r = -0.546$, $p < 0.01$). This indicates that areas with higher literacy levels tend to have lower dropout rates, suggesting literacy as a crucial protective factor against school discontinuation. The pupil-teacher ratio (PTR) shows a strong positive and significant correlation with dropout ($r = 0.510$, $p < 0.01$). As PTR is an important indicator for quality education, it helps to reduce the dropout rate. The higher the PTR reflects overcrowded classrooms or inadequate teacher availability and is associated with increased dropout rates. The demographic characteristics, like sex ratio (weak and negative ($r = -0.177$), share of SC and ST population (weak positive relationship), did not show any strong relationship to influence dropout rate in the study area. The number of primary schools has a negligible and insignificant negative correlation with dropout ($r = -0.024$), suggesting that mere numerical availability of schools does not necessarily ensure retention unless accompanied by quality inputs such as teachers and learning conditions.

Table 3.2.: Correlation between literacy rate, demographic characteristics, and educational infrastructure.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Dropout	1						
Literacy	-.546**	1					
Sex Ratio	-0.177	-0.041	1				
SC Population	0.175	-0.251	0.188	1			
ST Population	0.1	-0.358	0.312	.402*	1		
PTR	.510**	-.790**	-0.117	-0.003	0.134	1	
No. of Primary School	-0.024	-0.015	-0.106	.456*	0.176	-0.172	1

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Source: Author's calculation, District Report Card, DISE, 2013-14 and Census 2011

4. Concluding Observations

Elementary education in South 24 Parganas shows both progress and problems. The district includes highly urbanised areas near Kolkata as well as remote, rural and forested regions. This mixed nature strongly influences the condition of elementary education. The analysis presented above clearly indicates that enrolment, both at Primary and Upper Primary levels of education, has increased over a period. However, in terms of the ratio, it is still not enough to achieve the goal of universal elementary education. The NET enrolment rate is still lower than the universal level. The variety of efficiency indicators presented reveals that several pupils drop out of the system before the completion of the primary level of education, thus causing efficiency to drop to a great extent. Despite the implementation of the no-detention policy at the Primary level of education, a good number of pupils repeat primary classes. The average dropout rate being high at the primary level, it needs to be checked, without which neither the goal of universal primary education nor elementary education can be achieved. Many blocks, especially the forested and remote ones, show high dropout rates and low completion rates. Factors such as poverty, low parental literacy, shortage of teachers, and difficult physical conditions affect regular attendance and continuation of schooling. While access to elementary education has expanded, ensuring quality education and improving retention remain major concerns. Focused interventions at the block level, improvement in school infrastructure, adequate teacher availability, and support for disadvantaged communities are essential to strengthen elementary education in South 24 Parganas and achieve the goals of universal elementary education.

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