

# Development of English Language Curriculum in West Bengal with Special Reference to Ashok Mitra Commission and Pabitra Sarkar Commission

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52403/ijrr.20250735>

## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the guiding principles, comparative recommendations, and implementation challenges of two pivotal educational commissions in West Bengal: the Ashok Mitra Commission (1991) and the Pabitra Sarkar Committee (1998) with a focus on English language education. While both commissions sought to improve access, quality, and equity in schooling, they differed in their approach to the role and introduction of English, reflecting broader socio-political and cultural shifts. The analysis reveals that despite well-founded recommendations advocating inclusiveness, early bilingualism, and teacher development, numerous social and educational obstacles hindered their effective implementation. Key barriers included political interference, teacher union resistance, inadequate funding, infrastructure disparities, bureaucratic inertia, and entrenched social inequities. The study underscores the necessity of multi-level stakeholder coordination, adequate resource allocation, and culturally sensitive policy frameworks to realize meaningful reform in English language education in West Bengal. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in educational policy

implementation within diverse socio-political contexts.

**Key words:** Ashok Mitra Commission, Pabitra Sarkar Committee, West Bengal education, Language policy

## INTRODUCTION

The trajectory of English language curriculum development in West Bengal is deeply intertwined with the broader socio-political and educational reforms that have shaped the state's academic landscape since Independence. Among the most pivotal initiatives in this regard are the recommendations and guiding philosophies of the Ashok Mitra Commission (1991-1992) and the Pabitra Sarkar Committee (1998-2001). These two committees were formed at different points in time, under changing political dispensations and socio-economic realities, yet both aimed to reassess and revitalize the state's educational policies with particular attention to linguistic equity, pedagogical effectiveness, and cultural relevance.

The English language, in the post-colonial Indian context, occupies a complex and often contentious space simultaneously a tool for upward mobility and a symbol of elitism. In West Bengal, a state with a rich tradition of vernacular literary and intellectual production, balancing the role of

English with that of the mother tongue has long been a subject of academic debate and policy reform. The Ashok Mitra Commission, established during the Left Front regime, laid the foundation for an education policy that emphasized access, equity, and the strengthening of regional languages while reconsidering the place of English in the early years of schooling. In contrast, the Pabitra Sarkar Committee, convened nearly a decade later, responded to evolving global realities, parent aspirations, and employment demands advocating for a more pragmatic and inclusive approach to English education.

This paper seeks to explore the development of the English language curriculum in West Bengal by examining the vision, mission, guiding principles, and the obstacles encountered by both the Ashok Mitra Commission and the Pabitra Sarkar Committee. Through a comparative and contextual analysis, the study aims to uncover the philosophical underpinnings, policy shifts, and implementation challenges that these commissions faced, and how their legacies continue to inform the English education policy in the state today.

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Sur (2013) carried out a study titled “*A Study of the Attitude of the Bengali Medium Students Towards English Language*” involving 400 randomly selected students from Murshidabad, Nadia, and North 24 Parganas. Using a narrative survey-type questionnaire, the study explored students’ perceptions of English. It highlighted that English was initially taught in primary schools but later shifted to higher classes before being reintroduced early due to public demand. While some viewed early English education as challenging and dropout-inducing, many science and Bengali medium students valued English for academic advancement and access to global resources, emphasizing its importance in modern education.

Dey (2020) conducted a study titled “*Teaching English as a Second Language in*

*West Bengal*”. The study highlighted that before independence, English held high status as the language of rulers, courts, and official work, aiding social mobility. Post-independence, its demand grew, becoming a link language in India. English served not only for communication but also as a source of entertainment and stress relief. Declared a Second Language, its daily usage increased. However, challenges in West Bengal’s English education persist. Dey emphasized the need for trained teachers, improved teaching quality, and a supportive environment. The study recommended enhancing listening and speaking skills, adopting the Constructivist approach, and using modern teaching materials to boost students’ creativity and engagement.

Banerjee (2016) conducted a study titled “*A Study of Current Status Quo of English as a Second Language in India Study Done on West Bengal Schools*”. The study examined English’s role in India’s education system, especially in West Bengal, highlighting its growing importance in a globalized world. It argued that English should be treated as a primary language in state schools, not merely a second language. Once seen as foreign, English is now viewed as a symbol of progress and opportunity. Proficiency in English helps students access higher education, better jobs, and reputed institutions. In West Bengal, students with strong English skills had clear advantages. Banerjee noted that limiting English to a second-language status in government schools restricted opportunities. The study urged greater emphasis on English education.

Maity (2023) reported a study titled “*A Comprehensive Analysis of the Evolution of School Education in West Bengal*”. The study explored the history and development of school education in West Bengal, tracing key milestones and reforms from the colonial period to the present. It analyzed how social, political, and cultural factors influenced educational growth. Maity highlighted post-independence changes in curriculum, teaching methods, and

technology use. The study noted challenges like poor infrastructure, rural-urban disparities, inadequate teacher training, and educational inequality. Drawing from historical records, policy reports, and data analysis, it offered a comprehensive overview of the state's educational journey. It concluded with recommendations to enhance quality, inclusivity, and effectiveness, aligning the education system with the needs of modern society.

Awal (2021) undertook a study titled "History of English Language Education in Bengal under the British Raj: A Historical Analysis". The study examined the development of English language education in Bengal under British rule from 1757 to 1947. It focused on how British policies and education commissions promoted English while attempting to balance it with Bengali. Awal highlighted the roles of Bengali landlords and Christian missionaries in expanding English education. The study explored socio-political debates and resistance surrounding English education and traced evolving teaching methods over time. It also gave special attention to women's inclusion in English education, detailing their struggles and progress using historical evidence. Overall, the study offered a nuanced view of English education's growth during colonial Bengal.

### Objectives of the study:

1. To analyze the principles and philosophical foundations guiding the recommendations of both commissions regarding English language curriculum.
2. To explore the similarities and differences in the curriculum approaches suggested by the Ashok Mitra Commission and the Pabitra Sarkar Committee.
3. To identify the key challenges and obstacles faced in the implementation of English language curriculum as proposed by these commissions.

### Research Questions:

1. What guiding principles did each commission advocate for in shaping English language education in West Bengal?
2. How did the two commissions differ in Ashok Mitra Commission and the Pabitra Sarkar Commission recommendations regarding the role and status of English in the school curriculum?
3. What were the major social and educational obstacles that hindered the implementation of their recommendations?

### METHODOLOGY

**Research Design:** The study follows a descriptive-analytical design. It seeks to interpret the ideological, pedagogical, and policy-oriented aspects embedded in the commissions' reports. By using a qualitative approach, the study allows for an in-depth understanding of the educational philosophies and practical recommendations underlying curriculum decisions.

**Data Sources:** The primary data for the study consists of official documents and archival material, including: The Ashok Mitra Commission Report (1992). The Pabitra Sarkar Committee Report (1997). Policy briefs, government notifications, meeting proceedings, and supplementary materials related to the above reports. Secondary sources such as journal articles, newspaper archives, books, and critical analyses written by scholars on West Bengal's educational policies and language planning

**Data Collection Procedure:** Relevant documents were identified through visits to state government archives, university libraries, and online academic repositories. Emphasis was placed on gathering original or authenticated versions of the commission reports and related commentaries. The collected documents were analysed using qualitative content analysis techniques.

## ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

### Analysis and Interpretation Research

**Question 1:** What guiding principles did each commission advocate for in shaping English language education in West Bengal?

Over the years, several educational commissions and committees in West Bengal have influenced the shaping of English language education, each advocating distinct guiding principles shaped by historical, social, and political contexts. These commissions collectively aimed to balance the demands of modernization, cultural identity, and practical communication needs.

#### 1. **Emphasis on Accessibility and**

**Inclusiveness:** Many commissions, including the *National Education Policy (1986)* and the *West Bengal Education Commission (2013)*, underscored the principle of making English education accessible to a broad section of society, including rural and marginalized communities (Mandal et al., 2017). This principle sought to democratize English learning, moving beyond urban elites to ensure that students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds could benefit from English proficiency as a tool for upward mobility. With this was introduced a series of textbooks called LEARNING ENGLISH by West Bengal Board of Secondary Education along with Institute of English. It was definitely a revolution with the newly introduced Functional Communicative Method of Teaching English. (REPORT OF THE EDUCATION COMMITTEE, AUGUST 1992, GOVERNMENT OF WEST BENGAL)

#### 2. **Gradual and Contextual Introduction of English:**

Historical commissions during and post-British colonial periods recommended introducing English gradually and contextually. Initially, English was offered at higher levels of schooling but later advocated to begin from the primary stage to build strong foundational skills (Sur, 2023). This

approach reflected a growing recognition that early exposure to English would enhance language acquisition, helping students adapt to globalized educational and employment environments.

#### 3. **Balancing English with Regional Language and Culture:**

A consistent guiding principle was the need to preserve Bengali language and culture while promoting English. Commissions like the *West Bengal Secondary Education Commission* stressed a bilingual model where English serves as a global communication tool but Bengali remains central to cultural and identity education (Awal, 2021). This dual emphasis aimed to nurture students' linguistic competence in English without alienating them from their mother tongue or heritage.

#### 4. **Focus on Communicative Competence and Functional Use:**

Recent commissions like NCF 2020 have advocated moving beyond rote learning towards communicative competence in English. The *National Curriculum Framework (2005)* and related state commissions have also emphasized the development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills for real-life communication (Dey, 2020) that was introduced much a long way back in West Bengal with Ashok Mitra Commission and Pabitra Sarkar Committee. The principle was to create learners who are not only proficient in grammar but also confident and capable of using English in academic, professional, and social contexts.

#### 5. **Teacher Training and Resource Development:**

Recognizing the crucial role of educators, commissions recommended continuous professional development for English teachers and the provision of modern teaching resources. The *West Bengal Education Commission (2013)* urged the recruitment of qualified teachers trained in innovative pedagogical approaches

such as the Constructivist method (Dey, 2020). This principle stressed that effective English education depends on well-prepared teachers and supportive learning environments.

### Analysis and Interpretation of Research Question 2:

How did the two commissions differ in Ashok Mitra Commission and the Pabitra Sarkar Commission recommendations

regarding the role and status of English in the school curriculum?

The Ashok Mitra Commission (1991) and the Pabitra Sarkar Committee (1998) were two significant educational committees appointed by the Government of West Bengal to examine and recommend policies on language education, particularly focusing on the role of English in the school curriculum.

### Comparative Analysis

Aspect	Ashok Mitra Commission (1991)	Pabitra Sarkar Committee (1998)
Start of English	Class VI (Upper Primary)	Class I (Primary Level)
Philosophy	Child-centred, vernacular-focused, socialist	Demand-driven, pragmatic, global
Mother Tongue Emphasis	Strong emphasis	Maintained but balanced with English
Public Reception	Criticized for backwardness	Welcomed as progressive
View of English	Secondary; non-essential at early stages	Essential for opportunity and inclusion
Pedagogical Justification	UNESCO & Indian educational tradition	Global best practices in early bilingualism
Impact	Rise of English-medium private schools	Helped reduce rural-urban English gap (partially)

The Ashok Mitra and Pabitra Sarkar Commissions reflect a shift in educational philosophy from an ideologically-driven focus on regional language and equity to a more practical recognition of global realities and public demand. While both had valid concerns, the Pabitra Sarkar Committee balanced regional identity with global connectivity, making it more acceptable in a changing socio-political climate.

### Analysis and Interpretation of Research Question 3:

What were the major social and educational obstacles that hindered the implementation of their recommendations?

West Bengal has historically been a front runner in Indian education, but it has also faced significant structural challenges. To address systemic deficiencies, the Ashok Mitra Education Commission (1991) and later the Pabitra Sarkar Commission (1998) were constituted to recommend educational reforms, especially in the context of equity, access, and quality of schooling. However, many of their progressive recommendations

remained under-implemented. This paper explores the social and educational barriers that obstructed their implementation.

- 1. Political Interference and Lack of Continuity:** Both commissions made technocratic and pedagogically sound recommendations, but their execution was heavily affected by political interference and lack of administrative continuity across successive governments. Chattopadhyay, R. (2005). Educational reforms often fell prey to party-centric policy manipulation rather than being approached as long-term state projects. & Roy, R. (2004).
- 2. Resistance from Teacher Unions:** Recommendations involving teacher accountability, transfer policies, and regular assessments were met with resistance from organized teacher unions Banerjee, A. (2003). These bodies viewed reforms as threats to their job security and traditional privileges. Mitra, A. (1991).
- 3. Inadequate Financial Commitment:** Both commissions urged the state to

increase public expenditure on education, especially at the elementary level. Government of West Bengal. (1998). However, fiscal constraints, dependency on central grants, and competing development priorities meant that the state failed to allocate the recommended funds. Mukhopadhyay, M., & Parhar, M. (2001).

**4. Urban-Rural Disparity and Infrastructure Gaps:** Despite strong emphasis on rural education development in both reports, rural-urban divides in infrastructure, teacher availability, and school access remained major obstacles. Dreze, J., & Sen, A. (2013).

**5. Bureaucratic Apathy and Implementation Deficit:** The lack of trained and motivated administrative personnel at district and block levels severely impaired policy implementation. The top-down delivery model often resulted in poor translation of policy goals into field-level action. Majumdar, M. (2001).

**6. Social Inequities and Cultural Barriers:** Persistent caste-based discrimination, gender bias, and parental illiteracy in marginalized communities hindered the uptake of school reforms aimed at equity and access. Sharma, R. N. (2008).

While the Ashok Mitra Commission (1991) and the Pabitra Sarkar Committee (1998) envisioned transformative educational reforms in West Bengal, their implementation was obstructed by a complex interplay of social resistance, political constraints, bureaucratic inertia, financial limitations, and cultural barriers. For reforms to succeed, future policies must prioritize multi-level stakeholder coordination, adequate resource allocation, and community-based educational empowerment.

## Findings of the study

### 1. Guiding Principles of English

#### Language Education Commissions:

- Educational commissions in West Bengal consistently emphasized accessibility and inclusiveness, aiming to democratize English education beyond urban elites to rural and marginalized students.
- There was a gradual shift toward early introduction of English, moving from higher classes to primary education to strengthen foundational skills.
- A key principle was maintaining a balance between English and the regional language (Bengali) to preserve cultural identity while equipping students with global communication skills.
- Recent policy recommendations stressed communicative competence and functional English usage over rote learning, focusing on real-life communication skills.
- Teacher training and resource development were recognized as critical for effective English education, advocating for qualified educators skilled in modern pedagogical methods.
- Adaptation of English education to local socioeconomic realities was emphasized to make learning relevant to students' employment opportunities and social contexts.

### 2. Differences Between Ashok Mitra Commission and Pabitra Sarkar Committee on English Language Education:

- The Ashok Mitra Commission (1991) recommended starting English from Class VI, with a child-centered, vernacular-focused philosophy, emphasizing the mother tongue and socialism-oriented equity. It viewed English as secondary and non-essential in early schooling.
- The Pabitra Sarkar Committee (1998) advocated for starting English from Class I, embracing a demand-driven, pragmatic, and global outlook. It recognized English as essential for opportunity and inclusion, balancing

vernacular preservation with early bilingualism.

- Public reception of the Ashok Mitra Commission was largely critical due to its conservative stance on English, whereas the Pabitra Sarkar Committee was seen as progressive and more aligned with global trends.
- The Pabitra Sarkar Committee's recommendations helped partially bridge the rural-urban divide in English proficiency by promoting early and widespread English education.

### 3. Major Social and Educational Obstacles Hindering Implementation:

- Political interference and lack of administrative continuity undermined consistent and sustained implementation of commission recommendations, with educational reforms often subjected to party politics rather than long-term state planning.
- Resistance from teacher unions hindered reforms related to teacher accountability and transfer policies, as unions perceived these as threats to their security and privileges.
- Inadequate financial commitment and limited public expenditure on education restricted the ability to implement infrastructural and pedagogical improvements effectively.
- Urban-rural disparities in infrastructure, teacher availability, and school access remained significant, limiting equitable reform impact.
- Bureaucratic apathy and implementation deficits at district and block administrative levels caused poor translation of policies into practice.
- Social inequities and cultural barriers, such as caste discrimination, gender bias, and low parental literacy, further restricted the success of reforms aimed at inclusiveness and equity.

## CONCLUSION

The efforts of the Ashok Mitra Commission (1991) and the Pabitra Sarkar Committee

(1998) reflect West Bengal's evolving approach to English language education, shaped by changing social, political, and economic realities. While both commissions shared the goal of improving educational access and quality, they differed in their philosophies Ashok Mitra emphasizing vernacular primacy and gradual English introduction, and Pabitra Sarkar advocating early bilingualism and pragmatic global integration. Despite their comprehensive and forward-looking recommendations, the implementation of these reforms faced significant obstacles. Political interference, resistance from teacher unions, insufficient financial resources, urban-rural disparities, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and deep-rooted social inequities collectively impeded progress. These challenges illustrate the complexity of translating policy into practice within a diverse and stratified educational landscape. For future reforms to succeed, it is imperative to foster political will, ensure sustained funding, promote teacher empowerment, and engage communities to overcome cultural and social barriers. Balancing regional identity with global competencies remains crucial to creating an inclusive and effective English language education framework that can prepare students for the demands of the 21st century. The transformative potential of English education reforms in West Bengal hinges not only on sound policy design but also on the coordinated commitment of all stakeholders to overcome entrenched systemic challenges.

### *Declaration by Authors*

**Acknowledgement:** None

**Source of Funding:** None

**Conflict of Interest:** No conflicts of interest declared.

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How to cite this article: Sumeli Das, Amalendu Paul. Development of English language curriculum in West Bengal with special reference to Ashok Mitra commission and Pabitra Sarkar commission. *International Journal of Research and Review*. 2025; 12(7): 329-336. DOI: [10.52403/ijrr.20250735](https://doi.org/10.52403/ijrr.20250735)

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