

The Genesis...

Gradually the thirst to form a formal network was growing among the partners. This was enhanced by emerging necessity like i) it was gradually realised that evaluation, analysis and amendment of the training modules were a continuous process and it needed a collaborative effort, ii) not only teachers, it was felt that other members of the organisations were to be brought under the training programme for proper implementation of the objectives, iii) it was felt that the implementing organisations must work on a common platform so as to voice their views on quality formal education among the community.

At this juncture a number of meetings between CRY and all its partner organisations with the agenda of i) knowing each other and ii) sharing views, and learning lessons from each other, iii) commitment to meet regularly and to opt for networking among themselves were organised (Vikramshila-3rd Oct 1996, Nistha –23rd Dec 1996, Swanrbhar-23rd June 1997 till Feb'97 meet). In one of these meets, the rhetoric of the ensuing network were drawn, the name (West Bengal Education Network) and its objective (universalisation of elementary education, free qualitative education for all) were decided upon, core members and representatives to the network from participating organisations were selected, responsibility of the core group regarding collection and dissemination of information, resource material on education were decided. Meanwhile, the effects of this networking meets were already blossoming (organisations were sharing, adopting and implementing programmes and strategies among themselves for example Swanirbhar adopted the concept of Kishore-Kishori programme of Nistha). In the meantime, following the initiative of Citizen's Initiative on Elementary Education In India(CIEE) and Action Aid, the base line survey of the state level scenario of elementary education in the state had been conducted and its reports, recommendations had been consolidated and was presented in the CIEE workshop(8th July 1997, Academy of Fine Arts). So the partner organisations had already started to draw the lines to act as a pressure group, at the state/national level to adopt quality education. Then came a series of meetings (12th Sept 1997-Sevakendra, 4-5th Dec. 1997-Antaranga, 20-21 Jan 1998-CSWS, 20-21st April NKJK, 16-17th July Mandra) where the agenda and action plan were drawn: i) discussions on the aims and objective of the network, formation of a network evaluation team to evaluate/document the activities of the member organisations, incorporation of newer tasks (towards disabled children), alliance over advocacy campaign for 83rd amendment of Education Bill and deciding on the action plan of the campaign, organisation of VEC at the respective areas. The objectives of WBEN was formulated to be i) to share views, resources, skills of the member organisations and interact with other organisations, govt., individuals working on education, ii) to establish relationship with other educational networks, iii) to build up an information resource centre, iii) to do relevant research and documentation, iv) to arrive at a common vision on basic education issues and to be sure of what is being advocated for and to oppose unhealthy anti-people issues, v) to

interact with the govt. at the state level, vi) to involve the media on education issues, vii) for the time being the network will involve CRY supported organisations. Later on depending on its workability and usefulness other Non-CRY organisation can be roped in.

Meanwhile 1998 had seen the formation of NAFRE, the national coalition of education centric organisations spread through 14 states of India. And on 22nd July, Madhukar of NAFRE came to meet the NGOs of West Bengal. WBEN joined hands with NAFRE in its advocacy to recognise the Fundamental Right to education in the national level. From October 1998 till Sep.1999, the meetings and activities of WBEN and its partner organisations were centered around i) survey of the pre-primary level scenario of the state, ii) campaigning for positive changes in the 83rd amendment of the Education Bill (Right to education) and sensitising the mass on it, iii) planning and organising the State Convention on Education and iv) working towards NGO-Panchayat collaboration. From Oct. 1999, WBEN and its partners geared up to prepare for the National Meet organised by NAFRE at Delhi.

...And Onwards:

The national meet (Nov1999) organised by NAFRE proved to be an acid test for WBEN. It was observed that the number of participants from West Bengal was very insignificant and that too was merely on individual basis (representatives from a handful CRY/WBEN partners attended the meet, not a single community participation was seen). Moreover the meet brought to the forefront the lacking on the part of WBEN and its partners, in mobilising the community and creating a mass base. So, it was needed once more to sit together (8-9thDec1999-12th jULY2000) and the following matters were chalked out: i) not only CRY partners, WBEN should rope in other non- CRY organisations, development organisations working on education, ii)necessity of broad basing to more districts and also into blocks and into the community, ii) need for a firm organisational structure and WBEN's own action plan (till then the programmes and strategies of the CRY partner organisations were the action plan of WBEN) i.e. setting up a long term vision, iii) extending the working sphere of WBEN.

The year 2000 was spent on campaigning for the 83rd Amendment of the Right to Education Bill and conducting surveys on elementary education scenario of the state, collecting letters of assertion from eminent persons, broad basing with other organisations, academic institutions. The ideology and objective of WBEN was again clearly spelt as: i) to act as a collective force for collective action / pressure group to create awareness/mobilise people about issues related to education and other predominant issues affecting their lives, ii) to oppose anti-people policies, ii) to strengthen govt. efforts to save formal school system, iii) to ensure that State does not abdicate its responsibilities in vital sectors, iv) to maintain a synergic relation with other state and national alliances. And these activities again brought forward the lack of proper political approach, attitude and perspective to take up the following actions like i) efforts to amend the constitution ii) efforts to take up issues of amending bills, in WBEN itself. The State Convention was held on 16-17th Dec, 2000.

The year 2001 saw WBEN actively taking up the issue of establishing linkages with formal

schools and participating in the National Summit for Right to Education. In the meantime, the 86th amendment of the Constitution had been passed and education has been recognised as a Fundamental Right (Nov2001). Free and Compulsory Education Bill had been placed before the Nation in which the children within the age group 0-6 years have been stripped of their fundamental right to education and the compulsion to impart education to children above 6 years, have been transferred to the parents shoulder rather being a state responsibility. During the period 2002--05 the following activities were taken up: i) conducting evaluation surveys on SSA, MSK, violation of child rights, ICDS, Mid -day meal and VEC activity, ii) publication of a Newsletter "Samapath", iii) joining NAFRE on CSS issue, organising workshop on CSS and drafting recommendation on CSS to be sent to CAGE Committee, iv) campaigning and sensitising the community, gathering opinions of eminent persons ,academicians on the flaws of the free and compulsory education bill(2001).

The activities again brought to the forefront the following needs : WBEN must i) not merely act as a platform for sharing resources, views, strategies among the members but WBEN must emerge as a true mass alliance and should shed away its "NGO based alliance feature", ii) strengthen and consolidate as a powerful alliance which means more broad basing, not only among blocks, panchayat but among community organisations, clubs etc. to ensure proper community participation, iii) have a structural set up but not to devote too much attention in building up the organisational set up of WBEN, iv) remember that mere participation of NGOs will not ensure community participation, one has to work separately for it, v) initiate its own campaign programmes, must have its own activity, vii) the EC of WBEN must ensure community participation and finally vii) acknowledge that though education is the focal point of WBEN still other issues which are symbiotically related to education (e.g. child rights issues, livelihood issues) must be taken up .