



## **CONDITIONAL SUPPORT, NOT FREEBIES: WHY GOVERNMENT MUST LINK STUDENT BENEFITS WITH ATTENDANCE AND MARKS FOR TRUE DEVELOPMENT OF EDUCATION**

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### **Abstract**

This research article critically examines the current policy of unconditional free benefits to students in government schools in India, with special reference to West Bengal. While schemes like free textbooks, uniforms, Mid-Day Meal, Sarathi bicycles, Kanyashree, Aikyashree and Student Credit Card have increased Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) from 75% in 2000 to over 95% today, the quality of learning, as revealed by ASER 2023, has declined. Fifty percent of Class 5 students cannot read Class 2 text. As a Headmaster with over 26 years of experience, the author has observed that average attendance in government schools has fallen to 60-70% because benefits are not linked to attendance or academic performance. Students consider school as a distribution centre, not a learning centre. This article proposes a Conditional Support Model: basic benefits should be linked to 75% attendance and 40% marks, higher benefits to 80% attendance and 50% marks, and special incentives to 85% attendance and 60% marks. The paper reviews international models like Brazil's Bolsa Familia and Bangladesh's Female Stipend Program and argues that conditional support ensures better utilization of public money, instills discipline, and improves learning outcomes. It concludes that education can be free, but free-riding should not be allowed.

**Key Words:** Conditional Cash Transfer, Freebie Culture, Student Attendance, Academic Accountability, Quality Education, NEP 2020, Government Schemes, Kanyashree, ASER, UDISE+

### **INTRODUCTION**

Manu Smriti says, "Vidya Dadati Vinayam" - Education gives humility. But humility comes only when education is earned with effort. In ancient Indian Gurukul system, education was never completely free. A student had to live with the Guru for 12 years, collect wood, tend cows and beg for alms. That struggle taught him the value of knowledge.

After independence, India adopted the model of a welfare state. To remove social inequality, the government rightly made education a fundamental right under Article 21A and enacted the Right to Education Act 2009.

In West Bengal, a student studying in a government school gets at present: free education up to Higher Secondary, free textbooks up to Class 8, free uniform and shoes, Mid-Day Meal up to Class 8, Kanyashree K1 Rs. 1000 per year and K2 Rs. 25000 one time for girls, Aikyashree Rs. 2000-6000 for minorities, OBC/SC/ST scholarships, Sabooj Sathi bicycle worth Rs. 3500 in Class 9, and Student Credit Card up to Rs. 10 lakh for higher studies. The government spends about Rs. 18,000-22,000 per student per year excluding teacher salary.

Has this investment given desired results? Enrolment has definitely increased. Dropout rate at elementary level has fallen from 62% in 2001 to 19.8% in 2023 as per UDISE+ data. Girls' enrolment has surpassed boys in many districts due to Kanyashree.



But there is another side of the coin, which is visible only to a teacher who takes attendance daily. In my school Raniganj Sri Guru Nanak Vidyalaya High School (H.S.), we have 280 students in Higher Secondary alone, which is increasing while many schools in Raniganj are losing students. But our average daily attendance is only 62-65%. Many students come only on days when forms for scholarships or bicycles are distributed. UDISE+ 2023-24 shows average attendance in West Bengal secondary schools is 68%.

Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2023 reveals a painful truth: 57% of Class 8 students in rural West Bengal cannot do simple division. If benefits are free, where is the motivation to learn? This article argues that the government must support students, but support should not be completely free. It should be conditional with compulsory attendance and minimum marks.

## **1. THE CULTURE OF FREEBIES IN EDUCATION: MERITS AND DEMERITS**

### **Merits of Free Support:**

1. Access to Education: First-generation learners, especially girls from poor families in Raniganj coal-belt area, have come to school only because of Kanyashree and free bicycles.
2. Reduction of Financial Burden: For a daily wage labourer earning Rs. 400 per day, buying books and uniform costs Rs. 5000, which is unaffordable.
3. Social Equity: Scholarships for SC, ST, OBC and minorities have reduced caste and religious gaps.
4. Nutritional Support: Mid-Day Meal has improved nutrition and has increased attendance in primary classes by 10-12% as per studies by Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen.

### **Demerits Observed on Ground:**

1. Low Value Perception: Psychologically, man does not value what he gets free. Some students damage bicycles within months.
2. Parental Negligence: Parents send children to work in shops and send them to school only for form fill-up.
3. Rise of Private Tuition Culture: Students take free admission in government school but study in private tuition centres.
4. No Link Between Benefit and Effort: A student who comes daily and scores 70% and a student who never comes and fails both get same bicycle. This kills motivation of good students.
5. Misuse of Funds: Field survey in our school in 2024 shows 30% of scholarship money is used for mobile recharge or online games.
6. Administrative Burden: Teachers spend 40-50 days per year in distribution and data entry instead of teaching.

## **2. WHY 75% ATTENDANCE MUST BE COMPULSORY**

NEP 2020 says education must be holistic and experiential. Can holistic development happen without coming to school? No.



A. Academic Reason: Learning is sequential. John Dewey in his book Democracy and Education (1916) said learning by doing requires presence.

B. Social and Moral Reason: School teaches punctuality, discipline, respect and teamwork. Swami Vivekananda said education should build character.

C. Legal Reason: In colleges under UGC and in universities, 75% attendance is compulsory. In CBSE, 75% is mandatory. Why not in schools?

D. Economic Reason: Mid-Day Meal is cooked on basis of enrolment. If out of 100 enrolled, only 60 come, 40 meals are wasted. CAG report 2022 pointed out wastage of Rs. 234 crore due to inflated enrolment.

E. Psychological Reason: Regular attendance builds habit. William James said habit is the flywheel of society.

Hence, we propose: No benefit without 75% attendance. Attendance should be recorded through biometric linked to Banglar Shiksha portal. Medical leave up to 10% may be allowed.

### **3. WHY MINIMUM MARKS MUST BE COMPULSORY**

At present, under no-detention policy up to Class 8, students are promoted automatically without learning.

#### **Why minimum 40% marks are necessary:**

1. Accountability of Public Money: Taxpayer spends Rs. 20,000 per student per year. He has right to expect at least 40% learning.
2. Motivation Theory: When a student earns his scholarship with 50% marks, he feels proud. Free money without effort creates dependency syndrome, as described by Paulo Freire in Pedagogy of the Oppressed.
3. Prevention of Future Dropout: ASER data shows students who cannot read in Class 5 drop out in Class 9.
4. International Best Practices: In Japan, South Korea and Singapore, scholarship is withdrawn if student fails. That is why they rank top in PISA test.
5. Restoring Respect for Teachers: When marks have no value, students do not respect teachers.

#### **Proposed 3-Tier Model:**

Tier 1 - Basic Support: 75% attendance + 40% marks - Eligible for free books, uniform, Mid-Day Meal, bicycle.

Tier 2 - Financial Support: 80% attendance + 50% marks - Eligible for Kanyashree, Aikyashree, OBC/SC/ST scholarship.

Tier 3 - Merit Support: 85% attendance + 60% marks - Eligible for extra Rs. 2000 incentive, free tablet, exposure visit.

Students below Tier 1 will be put in 3-month remedial bridge course during summer vacation.



#### 4. CONDITIONAL SUPPORT: INTERNATIONAL EXAMPLES

1. Brazil Bolsa Familia (2003): Poor families get money only if children maintain 85% attendance. Dropout fell by 8%.
2. Mexico Prospera: Enrolment in secondary increased by 10%.
3. Bangladesh Female Secondary School Stipend Program (1994): Girls get stipend only if they maintain 75% attendance, 45% marks and remain unmarried. Girls enrolment increased from 33% to 56%. Child marriage reduced by 25%. This is similar to our Kanyashree.
4. Haryana's Apni Beti Apna Dhan: Money given only after 18 years if girl remains unmarried and completes education.

#### 5. OBJECTIONS AND SOLUTIONS

Objection 1: Poor students cannot score 40% because they have no tuition.

Solution: Government should use part of scholarship money to run free remedial classes after school hours.

Objection 2: Low attendance due to illness, farm work.

Solution: Allow 15% relaxation for medical reasons with certificate. But habitual absenteeism must not be rewarded.

Objection 3: It will increase burden on teachers.

Solution: Attendance and marks are already entered on Banglar Shiksha portal. Software can automatically calculate eligibility.

Objection 4: It violates RTE.

Solution: Education remains free. Only additional monetary benefits are conditional. This is legally valid. RTE gives right to education, not right to cash without education.

#### 6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As a Headmaster of a school with 900+ students in Raniganj coal belt, I daily see both sides. I see a girl who walks 4 km to come daily and scores 65% and deserves every support. I also see a boy who never comes but comes on bicycle distribution day.

Our present unconditional free system rewards both equally. This is injustice to the hardworking girl.

Government is like a mother. A good mother feeds her child, but also teaches discipline. If a mother gives unlimited pocket money without asking where it is spent, the child gets spoiled.

**Therefore, my humble recommendations:**

1. Continue and even increase financial support.
2. Make 75% attendance compulsory for any scholarship/bicycle.



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3. Make minimum 40% marks compulsory for basic benefits and 50% for scholarships.
4. Use biometric attendance.
5. Provide 3-month remedial coaching for weak students.
6. Give awards to schools with highest conditional performance.

Let us remember Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam: "Education without values and discipline is no education."

Education should be free, but free-riding should not be free. Support should be a ladder to climb, not a crutch to depend on.

Shiksha Muft Ho Sakti Hai, Lekin Muftkhori Nahi Honi Chahiye.

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