

Brand: Government School

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When Azim Premji Foundation made a fundamental decision to work with rural Government schools and focus on Government School Education System (as opposed to individual geographies or schools) it was fully aware of the several challenges that exist in the Government schooling system. In many ways, it was a natural decision for the Foundation.

Among the various ways that we evaluated to contribute to social change, we found education as the most powerful way. Within the education domain, we had several options such as higher education, technical education, management education etc. We realized that school education is where it all begins therefore it was a natural decision to work with school education as a priority.

In 1998, available census data revealed that over 84% children in our country (and over 88% in rural India) were studying in Government schools. Probably the biggest challenge was that close to 59 million children were out of school. The PROBE report revealed several reasons for children either remaining outside school or being pushed out of the school.

We also found that the middle class onwards part of the society had vacated the Government schools – in fact they have vacated most public services such as health, public distribution system, transportation etc. Therefore what was left in the public school were largely the children of those who did not have voice and did not have choice. Quite naturally, this significantly reduced the pressure on the Government system to deliver better quality public services including education.

Over a period of time, we realized the vastness of the canvass. There were over 1.3 million schools, 250 million children, 70 million teachers and another one million people supporting the schools from outside. Any person who understands managing large systems would know the implications of making things happen in such a system – primarily due to its size itself. The complexity of implementation is further compounded with education being administered by 30 different states to suit their conditions, cultures and socio-economic conditions.

After the year 2000, with the advent of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, several positive steps were initiated by the Government resulting in dramatic increase in the number of schools, number of classrooms, provision of toilets, drinking water facilities, appointing number of teachers etc. But quality and equity in education has eluded for the vast majority of schools. After 68 years of independence and 30 years of National Policy for Education, the statistics for girls and boys, for urban and rural has a gap of close to twenty five percentage points.

There are several disconcerting issues – adherence to the RtE by the Government school is abysmal, school-wise teacher pupil ratio is grossly inadequate, the critical institutions created to provide academic support to the schools are inadequately resourced – both in terms of quantity and quality, resources provided to the school are grossly inadequate etc.

Some of the most critical issues at a systemic level are (a) the curriculum, design, duration and quality of delivery of Teacher Education in the country, (b) highly rote memory based examination system (c) practically no schools of education that develop all-round professionals for education – with necessary education perspective, deeper understanding of subjects, pedagogy, education management, assessment, technology in education, early childhood education, education for specially abled children, etc. leading to severe lack of high quality people in the education system. This is the single most significant reason for the shortage of people in cluster, block, district and state level academic institutions. And yet there is no determination to create Indian Education Services recommended by the National Policy for Education.

All the above and, in addition, the severe shortage of Government funds have significantly eroded the image and reputation of Government schools.

The execution / implementation problems that the Government education system encounters are also the problems that most large organizations face. It is therefore rather unjustified to discuss these issues only in the context of Government. I personally do not find much difference in the way many

large organizations function and the Government functions. Some of the most common issues are – ensuring implementation of decision, recruiting – retaining and motivating talent, managing performance and ensuring quality. The private / corporate organizations have one advantage – most people in the organization have one rallying point – profits or money, whereas different stakeholders have a divergent view about education.

The additional difficulties in the Government system are – political interference, uncertain tenures of people in the given role and absence of accountability due to lack of performance management culture and any kind of risk-reward system.

However despite all the above, my colleagues and I – who spend significant time in the field - visiting Government schools and offices are constantly motivated with what we see in these schools and offices. While the constraints are similar, there are enough people in all roles – teachers, school principals, cluster-block-district functionaries and parent communities who create huge respect in our minds in the way they are focussed on their responsibilities.

Their determination keeps alive our hope that the system will eventually develop a critical mass of people who will create that change in the classroom which has been envisaged in our constitution, our education policy and our curricular framework. There are principals of District Institutes of Education Training (DIETs) who are trying to stay on course to provide some meaningful academic inputs to the schools despite being denied the agreed resources in terms of infrastructure, number of people and quality of people. The average strength of faculty available in DIETs across the country is merely 10 (against the approved number of 20+) and that too with a skewed subject spread. There are DIETs where only two faculty members have been appointed. However, the principal has not allowed her morale to be adversely affected.

A few months ago, in a discussion with a Block Education Officer (BEO) I asked him – ‘How do you manage with over 45% single teacher schools in your block?’

He smiled and told me ‘Forget the single teacher schools, I have 127 ‘no teacher’ schools in my block.’ He is managing the schools by temporarily shifting the teachers from one school to another, without

permanently transferring them. He is cheerful, working with great spirits and has a tremendous sense of responsibility.

There are several principals of schools in remote areas that are working hard to ensure their children learn despite being single teacher schools and in some cases, ‘no teacher’ schools. Despite the crunch on resources and general neglect by the larger system, they make every effort to ensure that their schools are clean, have a proper assembly, teachers teach something sincerely, disadvantaged children are taken care of, school management committee meetings are held regularly (and meaningfully) and proper mid-day meals are served to attending children. They ensure that the science kits supplied under the Government programmes are opened and utilized. I met one such principal just two weeks ago and it was a fulfilling experience. It was a school with five classes and just two teachers in addition to the principal. You could see her care and presence everywhere – including for a teacher whose family met with an accident during which the teacher lost her husband and son. The teacher herself was seriously hurt and since then gets unpredictable seizures.....she got one when we were present in the school. The alacrity and concern with which the Principal acted was remarkable. Later I learnt that the Principal had recently received the Governor’s award for her performance.

And finally, there are teachers who regularly brave weather and distance to reach the schools, care for their children in the class, try their best to understand the newer things around them and ensure that the children, too, get the experience of their environment. These are the teachers who are very keen to learn. These are the teachers who attend the voluntary teacher forums of Azim Premji Foundation with keenness – on time beyond the school hours – including Sundays and other holidays. They want to give a new meaning to their profession. We at Azim Premji Foundation have never understood why this tribe of teacher is so maligned by the general public – especially by people who have never visited the Government schools.

There have been occasions where in our meetings with larger groups of Government education functionaries, these members raise apprehensions and concern about the migration of children from Government schools to private schools. They all agree that the Government schools, by and large,

have better infrastructure, more qualified and higher paid teachers, better academic support, larger component of in-service training and larger per child spend levels. At the same time, most of them admit their children in the private school and they are unable to explain why. After much discussion and probing, it emerges that it is largely the reputation of the Government schools and the brand that has suffered over a period of time. Somehow, private schools have managed to create a perception that the quality of education is better in their schools. This is not supported by any research findings. In fact, all major research in the past 12 years have pointed that either there is no difference in the quality of education between public and private schools or if at all, the quality in public schools is marginally higher.

Consider some additional factors:

Government schools have a legal and social responsibility of admitting every child that seeks admission. They cannot discriminate on the basis of socio-economic class, caste, religion or so called assessment of the academic performance of the child. In short, they cannot pick and choose children the way the private schools can and do.

Since the children in Government schools come largely from socio-economically weaker sections, they have very little or no exposure to early childhood education. Their parents are often illiterate or first generation literates, fully engaged in their efforts

to earn a livelihood and therefore unable to offer educational support to their children. As such the children are rather under-prepared for being in the first standard. In comparison, most of their counterparts in the private schools have exposure to pre-school education, hail from stronger socio-economic class where the parents are able to engage with their development.

Government schools are required to deal with this massive disadvantage – which is never factored in by the general public. Unlike in most private schools, the focus in the Government schools is not on merely preparing the children to perform better in the 10th standard examinations.

Indian Government school system is the largest in the world and has the unique reach of having a primary school within a kilometre of each village. In a nation where infrastructure development (roads, electricity, and water supply) have lagged behind terribly, this reach of education to all sections of society was a tremendous achievement.

If this achievement has to be leveraged, we must actively promote 'Brand, Government School'. Not through hollow slogans but by actively and urgently addressing the inadequacies that are becoming a barrier to such a brand. We believe it is possible and the nation like India has no alternative but to develop its public education system and promote the brand through delivery of quality education for all its children.

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