

Romancing with Education

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I love learning. Learning is the heart and the soul of education. That explains my lifelong love with education – formal, non-formal, informal et al. Let us have a peep into a fragment of my love life that has been as challenging as fulfilling and occasionally appearing to be hugely frustrating, endlessly disappointing and dismal beyond repair, but when clouds clear, the sun of optimism and enthusiasm shining as bright as in midday. I will just skip the fascinating experience of joys and disappointments of facilitating the learning of class fellows, juniors and even seniors that started with the third standard and continued until I remained a student.

Even for this period, two episodes where my role and status was of a formal teacher deserve brief mention. In 1954-55, as a student of class XI, on the annual self-government day of the Government High School, as the Chief Minister of the school parliament, I had the privilege of being the headmaster for a day. I taught a class of English to the students of eighth grade. The pride of being headmaster for a day was probably surpassed by my happiness in the self-rated excellent and satisfying role as a teacher.

After this fleeting flirtation with formal education, a more lasting affair was as a school-teacher. During the period 1957 – 59, as an undergraduate student, probably inspired by the nostalgia of the ecstasy I felt as a teacher in the school on the self-government day, I offered to volunteer to work as a teacher of English in a night school run by my college – Hislop College Nagpur, government aided but privately managed – for dropouts which I now call, and believe to be, push outs. Most of them were adolescent and adult workers of the cotton mills and the industries in and around the city. I enjoyed teaching-learning with the students of 9th and 10th classes that reinforced my self-image of a good teacher. Without any understanding of inequity in education and unsuitability of the rigid formal schools system for the social and economically deprived, I had a very uneasy feeling and deep concern about their further deprivation from education also that they suffered and which

they were trying to make up.

Most of the students in the night school were Marathi speaking. As an English teacher who had negligible understanding of, let alone competence in, Marathi, I learned many lessons on the pedagogy of teaching a second, particularly a foreign, language, without switching over to Marathi, so that the students acquired proficiency in the language and not only in the content of the chapters of the textbooks. This challenge accompanied by frustrations, shared both by the teacher and the learners, was more than compensated by the Eureka moment when I would note their eyes lit up and the face and the gestures unmistakably conveying a feeling of joy and happiness of achievement. This momentary happiness seemed to be good enough to amply compensate for the frustrations of the failed numerous earlier attempts, stretching my creativity – whatever little I had – to the limit.

The sudden jump from an ex-volunteer- school teacher to the manager, administrator and leader of around 500 rural schools in Sihora sub-division comprising four community development blocks of Jabalpur district is attributable to my joining the Indian Administrative Service in the year 1961, and being posted as SDM in 1963 (until 1965) when school education was a component of the system of democratic decentralisation in which Janpad Sabha, an elected local body at the sub-divisional level had substantial wide-ranging powers and functions in almost all development sectors. As the SDM, by law, I was also its chief executive officer. This provided me a remarkable opportunity to work for, and experience school education at grassroots of governance.

The policy of the State which I was supposed to implement had no concern for the complex issues of equity, including universal enrolment, attendance and participation. Article 46 of the Constitution probably had been forgotten as soon as the ink dried. I also merrily pursued the agenda of improving the quality of education only for those who were in the schools without ever bothering about those deprived. In retrospect, I consider shameful because it meant that I had not really

and properly absorbed the lessons of inequity in education that the night school had offered to me. It is ironical that at that time when most of those who were at the helm of affairs of the government were freedom fighters with varying quantum of idealism were also being driven by the agenda and demand of the powerful and articulate sections of the society, having totally forgotten Gandhiji's talisman of focusing on wiping the tears from the face of the most deprived.

I was very enthused to notice that the chairman of the Janpad and the chairman of the education committee were also very deeply interested in education, hoping to do wonders with their support. Very soon, I discovered, to my utter disappointment, that their interest was skin-deep, or teacher-transfer-deep. It however, took much longer to understand the dynamics behind it. The political power and importance of the teacher gradually dawned on me, which explained their limited interest, but also made my task easier. I kept myself away from the affairs of transfer of teachers and concentrated on improving the quality, which I must admit, was generally much more satisfactory than it is now. The schools also had vibrant cultural and sports activities, another area of my deep interest which I encouraged with the little financial and other support it required in different schools. Reflecting today, it appears that since there was no television and even the penetration of film was not deep, the folk forms of art and culture smoothly and easily gelled with the co-curricular activities that may explain its popularity.

The unique and very critical role of the teachers in politics is much better understood and recognised by the politicians than by all others involved in education with so-called missionary zeal. Ignoring this in designing and initiating any reform or intervention implies defective DNA of the intervention. This learning was very useful during the later career, although I cannot claim that I could successfully deal with it in the innovations that I initiated as principal secretary education or as founder director of Eklavya.

There were two unanticipated adverse consequences of my unusual interest in education. I did not realise that for the orthodox administration, any amount of excellent work in education is worthless because the focus ought to be hardcore administrative machinery. I narrowly escaped an adverse comment in my annual assessment

report, thanks to my boss Mr R S Naidu, the District Magistrate, a very seasoned and sound officer who had very great affection and fondness for me. Looking at my self-assessment report and the highlights of achievements in the education sector, he only orally cautioned me and provided me with the right administrative lens – criteria for fixing priority and focus.

In those days when the officers like the Sub-divisional Magistrate did not make news in the newspapers, the first time this unique distinction was conferred on me was highly adverse. It had reported that because of my angry, uncontrolled scolding and behaviour, the superintendent of the Janpad Sabha had had a heart attack. Since this was contrary to my generally held image of a very soft, gentle, kind and tolerant person amongst those who knew me, I had a very hard time explaining to everybody, particularly because the incident, though exaggerated, was a fact.

At 9:30 PM in the night before the inauguration of the annual tournament in which all schools were participating, I visited, probably unprecedented for the SDM and the CEO and therefore unexpected, the venue to see for myself that everything was being managed properly by the superintendent and his team responsible for the purpose. To my utter surprise, I found that while the students who had come from different parts of the subdivision after a very long and arduous journey on the bad roads of those days, had not been served their food, which was still in the process of being cooked, the superintendent along with his team was merrily having sumptuous snacks equivalent to what is fashionably called high tea. At the sight of this atrocious behaviour, I must confess I completely lost my cool. I was not my own self. I did shout at the top of my voice and expressed my anger as best as I could, or should I say, as worst as I could. Any explanations he tried to offer only infuriated me further because I believed that there could be no conceivable acceptable explanation for what I was observing. Within minutes he complained of high palpitation and left the room. It was left to me to organise food for the children at the earliest.

I don't blame my youth (I was only 23 years of age) or inexperience. I was moved by the hungry children. My empathy with them did not permit me to imagine the possible impact on and reaction of the aged superintendent, who at that time looked to me like the devil incarnate. I believe now, that

probably an experienced deputy collector may have handled things better. I will leave the judgement to you. This first experience of interface of the bureaucracy with the students and teachers was, to say the least, shattering.

In June 1966 (up to '68), I was posted as District Magistrate of Sidhi, a district reeling under two consecutive years of acute drought which unfortunately, because of the failure of that monsoon also, proved to be the third consecutive year. On the basis of the experience there (a detailed account of which is available in the book, 'District Collectors, Recollect' edited by Ramesh Arora and CK Saldana), I can claim expertise in management of drought conditions in situations of very short supply of food grains. Yet the lure of education has been so irresistible that, despite overwhelming preoccupation with management of drought, I intervened in education in a big way.

It was a predominantly tribal district. While travelling in the tribal belt, I had made a point to visit the schools where I soon discovered the pathetic quality – total absence would be no exaggeration – of education in the elementary schools. The class V students could not even read and write. The teachers would explain by blaming their predecessors. This poor quality of education, in contrast with the quality in the schools of Sihora, served to demonstrate dramatically the unattended regional inequality. I wrote to the Director Public Instruction, the head of education those days, to pay special attention and take corrective measures. To my disappointment, I found that there was no response, but regrettably my total involvement with drought conditions spared me no time to follow up my efforts.

The other intervention in education had a cascading effect. Its story would be long. It had a series of unimaginable shocks and surprises for me. I will keep the narration as brief as possible. Sidhi and the neighbouring districts were notorious for mass-copying in the examinations. I decided to ensure fair examinations. I had done this in the district headquarters with some success in respect of the examinations of the Board of Secondary Education. The University examination, however, proved to be a hard nut to crack. There was only one college in the district. I wrote to the Registrar of the Sagar University about the prevalent conditions of mass copying, suggesting to him the measures required to be taken by them for conduct of fair

examinations. After frustrating silence from their side, instead of acting on my suggestions, they only sent a letter authorising me to visit and inspect the examination centre. In those days any role of the District Magistrate in examinations was inconceivable. With my hands more than full in managing the famine, I had not the slightest desire to be personally involved. I had hoped that they would act on my suggestions and district administration would provide any support they sought. After having taken this initiative, I did not wish to withdraw because I was terribly keen to ensure fair conduct of examination.

On the busiest day of the examination, I suddenly arrived for inspection. I was aghast to observe the scenario. Copying was going on openly. Almost every student had a few books on the desk, along with some in the bag kept on the side. The quantum and openness of mass copying was beyond my imagination. I got all the material seized. A box of 8' x 4' of 3 feet height, full of the material was sent to the Registrar to whom in my report I sarcastically suggested to take advantage of the mass copying to fill the University library.

Once again for a long time, I did not receive any information about the action or proposed action of the University. I wondered whether educational bureaucracy both at the school and higher education level was so inefficient. The sight of mass copying proved to be a nightmare haunting me. Therefore, despite all my preoccupations, ensuring conduct of fair examinations became my mission. I decided to adopt strategy of negotiations with all the stakeholders in this task. Accordingly, I went to the college and met the students to appeal to them to eschew copying and to explain to them how it was in their own interest to study well and obtain marks and certificates based on real achievement which would stand them in good stead in their career and life. I was astounded by their open and stoutly determined defence unashamedly of the practice of copying, presenting their economic condition and other ingenious arguments, beyond my imagination, in support. A meeting with the parents was fixed, but was aborted by the students who drove the parents away. The teachers also pleaded helplessness in view of the threat from the students. My assurance to provide full security support did not satisfy them because, they argued, that security cover cannot be provided for their whole life and as soon as it was withdrawn, they would become vulnerable. In support of this view,

they gave examples of professors who had been attacked after quite a lapse of time.

After the strategy of negotiations was stonewalled, I was planning my alternative strategy when as bolt from the blue, the silence and inaction of the University was broken by their decision to discontinue the examination centre in the district and fixing the neighbouring Rewa for the purpose, as if the practice of mass copying was not there, although it was common knowledge that all the neighbouring districts were suffering from the malady equally badly.

This led to students' agitation, bringing the life of the town to a standstill. I had to use force for the first and only time in my career and impose curfew in the town which had never experienced such conflict earlier. Students blocked oxygen cylinders from being taken to the hospital for use of the patients for whose survival they were required. However, following the strategy of a flexible and evolving blend of direct negotiations, helpful mediations as well as use of force, the agitation was brought to an end after about 10 days. Those not involved in tackling a law and order situation in a small town with limited police force and resources cannot imagine the difficulty of the task. Most of the nights were used in planning for the strategy for the next day and the day was packed with action. By the end of it all, those of us who were directly involved were fully exhausted.

I've never felt angrier and more disappointed than when, after the end of the agitation, I received a letter from the University communicating the

decision taken by the Executive Committee of the University on the very day the agitation had started, modifying the earlier decision of discontinuing the examination centre at Sidhi and reinstating it. Was the callousness of the University bureaucracy pardonable, particularly when they were fully aware of the worsening situation of the agitation which was making big news? The agitation would have been called off the very first day if the information had been sent to us immediately on telephone. But for the unpardonable and atrocious insensitivity and inaction of the University bureaucracy, the entire team handling the law and order situation, the students themselves and the whole town could have been spared the unprecedented (for them) stress, hardship and tension.

As postscripts, I will share a fact and a secret. The fact is that the favourable decision of the University, despite concrete proof of mass copying, had emboldened the antisocial elements in the students, who during the next examination (I had moved to another district) had set fire to the building where question papers were kept for safe custody, giving rise to another law and order problem that had to be handled by my successor.

The secret is that my initiative and action to curb the practice of mass copying was a significant factor in my transfer from the district. It transpired that the important political leaders of the district were also in favour of the continuation of the practice.

I have no regrets: all the above have been extremely useful inputs in my continuing romance with education.

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