

View from the Ground

S Giridhar



In my work with Azim Premji Foundation, I travelled to almost every block where the Foundation was working with government schools, be it Deesa in Banaskantha or Mori in Uttarkashi or Pindwara in Sirohi. So when the editor of Learning Curve asked me to contribute an article to this special issue on public education, I thought that the best way I could fulfil the editor's mandate was to recall and write what I saw on the ground. But I must also confess that this is not going to be a neatly sequenced narrative but a dip into memories of visits to schools, and hoping that as I move from incident to incident, I will still end up with a kind of meaningful narrative.

What does it mean to be a teacher at the tiny village of Hanakanahalli in North East Karnataka? Many miles from even a small town in the taluk of Huvinahadagali – its name enchantingly means 'flowers being transported in a boat' - the village government school has 54 students, most of them first generation learners, their parents working as daily wage labour in the farms around the village. Two teachers in the school, one also doubling up as the head teacher. Out there in this outpost, it is almost as though they are the most autonomous of teachers. There is just the occasional bus that runs close to the village. The Cluster Resource person is incidental and peripheral to their existence, while it is impossible for the Block education Officer to visit their school more than once in 3 years. But the two teachers are there every day. The children arrive early. The school is small but neat. The timetable is theirs to decide. The district has of course given them the timetable, 40 minutes of Kannada and then 40 minutes of math, then 40 minutes of this subject and 40 minutes of that. But these two teachers know what they are doing and they have a rhythm. It is an entire day, theirs to plan and execute. So it becomes two hours of Kannada because they are doing a drama about a king and his durbar. It is a girl who plays the role of the king. Every child in school, every child learning and it has been so for many years. The teachers are simple souls, they are happy that their students clear the test for admission to Navodaya School.

Far and away in Banaskantha, Gujarat, a series of workshops have been planned for teachers to introduce them to some concepts of how to prepare interesting question papers – that do not test rote memorisation but some conceptual understanding. But it has been raining incessantly in the entire week leading to these teacher workshops. Much of the region is being inundated, and waist deep water surrounds the dharmashala where the workshops are to be conducted. The 'master trainers' have somehow arrived the night before the workshop is to commence but they are all worried whether any teacher will come tomorrow morning if it is raining and flooding like this? But at 9 am the next day, 120 teachers of Banaskantha troop in, men with trousers rolled well above their knees, the women with saris hitched up as much as possible, wading through the water and slush. And the programme begins. Would anyone have said anything if they had not turned up? No. But turn up they did. And over the next three days they argued, baulked, resisted and understood what this kind of assessment was all about. And then they went back to their schools in Deesa and Kankrej and Khedbrahma to try out the things they had learnt. In their schools, with their children, with their limited resources and with whatever they had been able to learn. They are ordinary people like you and me but they had shown the mettle they were made of.

Back in Bellary district, two schools separated by just 400 metres, both serving children of the same largish village (do not ask me why schools are situated like this). One unkempt and slovenly, with a disinterested head teacher who had not even read the 10 by 6 feet wall painting on the compound wall of his school exhorting the mantra of universal education, though he parked his motorcycle beside that wall every morning. The other school, less than half the area of the other school, two rooms, thriving, vibrant, buzzing with activity; the head teacher and his colleague managing a noisy, eager bunch of children. One school had got the children's uniforms and books well on time for start of academic year. The other one had no idea. The same village, same cluster, same block but a surreal picture, to see two completely different worlds

separated by 400 metres. What good luck for 50 children in Lingappa and Hanumanthappa's school and what infernal luck for the 120 in the other school!

To another place and from another visit some years ago; a tale that I have narrated before but am quite happy to repeat here. In remote Sirohi, where a feudal restrictive way of life is still pervasive, a band of women teachers in the face of family opposition attend voluntary forums of teachers on one Sunday every month. Of their own volition, spending their own money to travel; a keenness to learn and grow in their profession, forsaking a holiday whose preciousness for women can never be fully comprehended. Self-motivated, courageous, eager, sincerity shining on their faces, the unknown, unsung torch bearers. What else do I remember of my interactions with these rural government school lady teachers? For sure, the poignant words of one of the teachers: "I know that there will be no recognition from the system for all these things but if someone in the block office even sends me an SMS saying 'well done,' I will be happy for the rest of my life".

Do you remember government school teachers being given Rs.500 every year to create teaching learning material to augment the text books? I remember this well, for in my very early visits to schools I would unfeelingly say that all that this allowance does is to increase the sale of thermocole in the local markets because most teachers would simply cut and colour thermocole into some shapes that they thought would help them in the classroom. In these same places over the years I learnt a humbling truth – teachers want to learn, they want to improve. And so in the same village schools, when some resource persons showed these teachers the way they could create really helpful material to teach math or history, they simply surpassed themselves. The same teachers in Surpur taluk of Yadgir district who cut thermocole to depict temples and forts now worked with their children to create a captivating video to describe the history

of their villages – the significance of the special shape, size and construction of the graveyards or the special abilities of the local chieftain's armies that could climb the fort walls. Unobtrusively and naturally they along with the children made the educational journey to understand the centrality of evidence in history even as they accorded respect to the handed down narratives from generations of the local people.

As one stitches these vignettes of government schools and teachers in rural India, one can perhaps see a few things in the context of discussion around public education. One, that it is the hard working, committed, motivated teacher who loves her work who makes all the difference. Two, there is enough space and autonomy in public schools and curriculum for the teachers who wish to exercise such autonomy. Three, resources and material can be accessed by the resourceful teacher who wants the best for her children. When one discusses something as gigantic as the public education system, there are buzz words like policy implementation, academic and administrative institutional support and other things that treat the system as one large monolith. We miss the point completely. On the ground, for the valiant government school teacher braving all odds, it is a world of two class rooms, the children, the community that trusts them with the education of their children and their own conscience. These are children who are mostly first generation learners, with little or no parental support and with hardly any reading material in their homes, and for quite a few of these children the lunch provided at the school is the only hot meal of the day. For the teachers, as they strive to get books, uniform and other material on time, and work with the children to make every day count, every tiny step of progress made by their children is a huge victory. They are creating change in their own remote worlds and won't even want to understand what we mean by systemic change or wait for it.