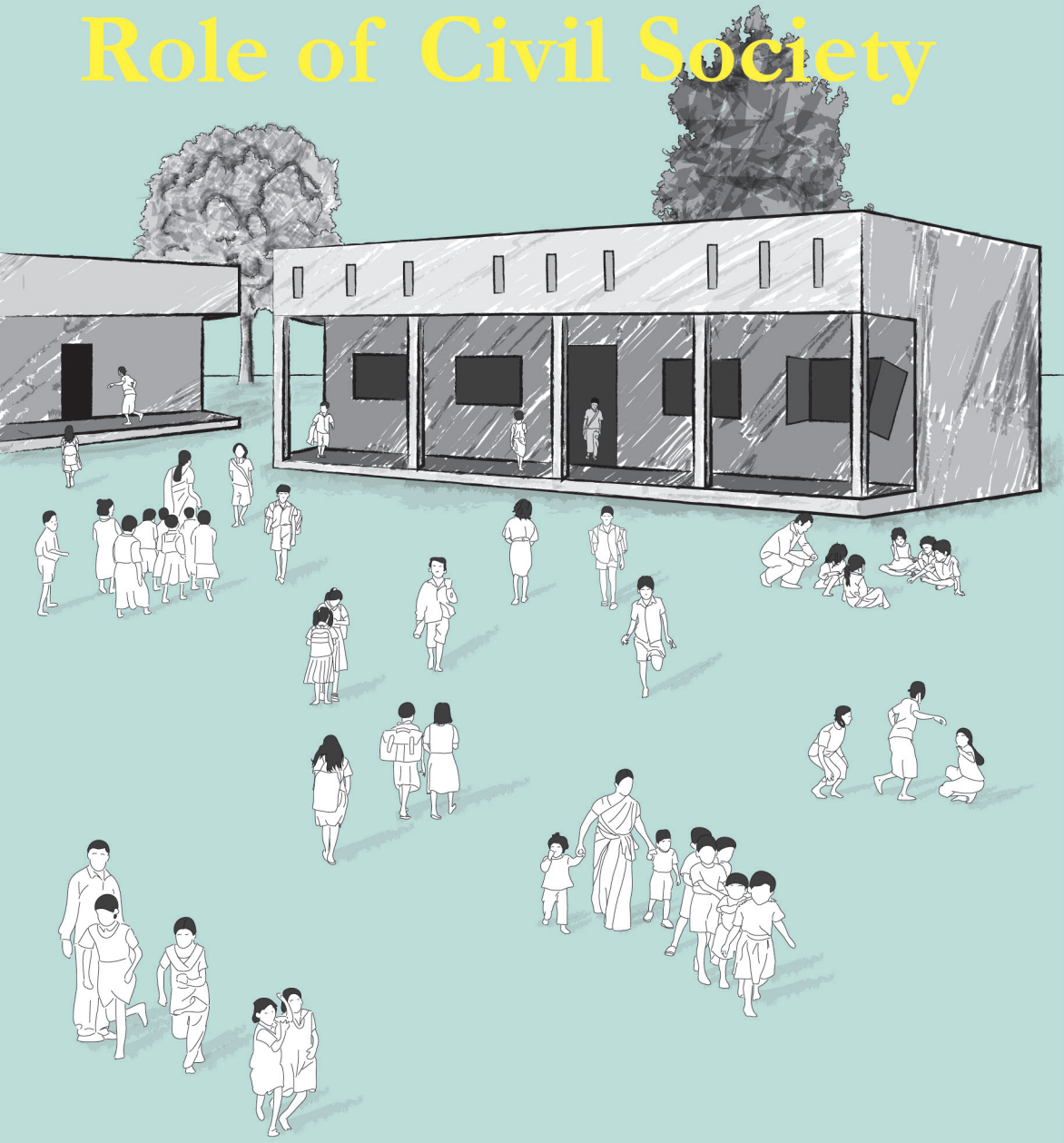
Improving Public Education- Role of Civil Society



Wipro Applying Thought in Schools Partners' Forum 2015

Improving Public Education- Role of Civil Society

Wipro Applying Thought In Schools
Proceedings of 15th Wipro Partners' Forum
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School of Ancient Wisdom, Bangalore

Wipro Applying Thought in Schools

Wipro Applying Thought in Schools (WATIS), one of Wipro's social initiatives, has been engaged in building capacities for school education reform in India for more than a decade. We believe in a social vision of democracy where each citizen not only realizes their potential, but also sees the ethic of equity, the essentiality of diversity and the ethos of justice. Our work is driven by the belief that education is a key enabler of social change, and schools have to be spaces that nurture these principles, capabilities & values.

Our key stratagem in this endeavor has been to partner with civil society and other organizations across the country; and more broadly, to foster a community of organizations and people who lead the thinking about good education in the nation. Through various projects - with diverse organizations and in diverse contexts - we try to explore the idea and extend the popular notion of good education.

Most of our partners have significant experience in working on school education reform, and come with a deep understanding and varied perspectives. Every year we have an event where all partners and other invitees interested in education, come together in a Partners' Forum. The intention of the Forum is to interconnect and strengthen this community of diverse people and organizations, and take up important debates around education. The forums are reflective and exploratory, consciously bringing in diverse perspectives to development, education and society in general, thus enriching our common knowledge and understanding of social issues. In previous years, it has deliberated on topics such as ecology & education, history & education, and assessments.

'Improving Public Education- Role of Civil Societies', was chosen as the topic for the 15th Partners' Forum. This book is an attempt to share our learning with a larger audience.

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Preface

The 15th Wipro Partners' Forum, held in April 2015, revolved around the following ideas or questions: What does effectiveness in systemic interventions or reform in public education mean? What could the different models of such interventions be? What makes such an intervention effective (or not)? What role does civil society organizations play and what could they play in this process? and so on.

The sessions on the first day looked at 3 different programs/ initiatives – the Mahila Samkhya Programme, the People's Science Movement and the Activity Based Learning initiative to understand the objectives, evolution, contributions to education and to the larger social agenda of these programs. Reflections and assessment of what has and hasn't worked in these programs were also presented and discussed. Each of these initiatives had its own unique characteristics and helped the participants understand and reflect on what different models can achieve and what are the pros and cons of different models.

The second day started with a relook at the past few decades to understand what kind of changes and reform have happened in the public education system and the role civil society has played in it. Dhir Jhingran and Hridayakant Dewan, two educationists who have worked extensively with the public education system and the civil society in the past few decades shared their perspectives about the changing dynamics in the education system, the civil society space and the key challenges and issues today in public education. This day also saw a few large organizations such as UNICEF, Azim Premji Foundation and Room to Read to presenting their perspectives and approach to working in the public education space and the roles they envisage for themselves in improving public education.

The third day started with a panel discussion on the question of whether the public education system is able to meet the needs of the marginalized and vulnerable children and what are the

challenges and how they could be addressed. The participants also broke away into smaller groups to discuss some of the key questions that emerged from the discussions such as: the purpose and challenges of scale, sustainability of civil society organizations(CSOs), relationship of CSOs with other stakeholders, including with bureaucracy and community, and on the spirit of volunteerism.

This book is an edited transcript of the presentations and discussions at the 15th Forum. Publishing and disseminating the proceedings is an attempt to take these discussions and reflections to the larger education community of teachers, parents, educationists and administrators and in some ways, engage them on the key challenges to improving public education and the role that civil society organizations and the education community can play in it. We hope you will enjoy reading the book and find it useful in your work and engagement with education.

Acknowledgement

A lot of effort went into making the 15th Wipro Partners' Forum happen the way it did and this book to come into being. We wish to express our sincere thanks to all invited speakers who shared their myriad experiences with regards to the topic; all our partner organizations and participants, for their presence over the 3 days and for adding to the richness of discussions; the team at the School of Ancient Wisdom who hosted us and made us feel at home; and all others who lent us a hand and were party to this endeavour in various forms.

Participants

A. R. Vasavi, Punarchith
Abdul Gaffar, Digantar
Abdul Jalil Ahmed, Jubayer Masud Educational Charitable Trust
Abhijeet Paul Zachariah, Wipro
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Anjali Noronha, Eklavya
Ankita Yadav, Doorstep School
Ankur Sarin, Indian Institute of Management- Ahmedabad
Anwar Jafri, Samawesh
Arun Elassery, Season Watch
Aruna Ratnam, UNICEF
Arvind Sardana, Eklavya
Ashish Shah, Season Watch
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Bala Subramaniam, EZ Vidya
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Murtaza Khetty, Bangalore Little Theatre
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Shaji E. K., JodoGyan
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Sharad Behar, Independent
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Shruti Nag, NEEV
Shubhra Chatterji, Vikramshila
Siddharth, Independent
Simantini Dhuru, Avehi
Sonia George, Wipro

Sourav Bannerjee, Room to Read
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Sudhir Singh, Digantar
Suhel Qauder, Nature Conservation Foundation
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Thejaswi Shivanand, Centre for Learning
Usha Menon, JodoGyan
Usha Raman , The Teacher Plus
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Vibha Sequeira, Wipro
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Mahila Samakhya Programme

Kameshwari Jandhyala, P Prasanthi, Ankur Sarin

KAMESHWARI JANDHYALA has worked on women's education, empowerment and livelihood issues for over 20 years. She is the first Director of Mahila Samakhya Andhra Pradesh and Consultant to the National Office of Mahila Samakhya in Department of Education, GOI. She is a keen researcher and has significant experience in qualitative research and programme development in education (women's education), women's studies and gender and development issues.

P. PRASANTHI is the State Programme Director of Andhra Pradesh Mahila Samakhya Society (APMSS). She started her career as an instructor in the Anganwadi Workers' Training Centre and was later a special educator in the Thakur Hariprasad Institute for the Mentally Handicapped in Hyderabad. She joined APMSS in 1997 and has worked in different positions, beginning from the district level right up to the state level. Her core interest is in evolving strategies and interventions for implementation at the grassroots to address strategic gender interests of women and girls.

ANKUR SARIN is a faculty member in the Public Systems Group at the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad. He teaches microeconomics and social entrepreneurship. Prior to IIMA, he was a researcher at Mathematica Policy Research in Princeton, New Jersey in the US. At Mathematica, he evaluated social policies and programs in many sectors including education, nutrition, food security and economic development.

Kameshwari Jandhyala: I was a little concerned as to how Mahila Samakhya would fit into a Partners' Forum where most of you are working with school education. On reflection, both Prasanthi and I felt that perhaps we have something to offer – a few insights based on our experience in working with women, and particularly through the Mahila Samakhya Programme, which as some of you might know, is a Government of India programme located within the Ministry of Education. That itself has been a very contentious issue – why a women's programme should be located within the education department.

Since I have two colleagues who, after me, will give you more substantive insights into how Mahila Samakhya is playing itself out in the field, I would like to concentrate on a few issues of relevance to you, particularly at this juncture when many of us are concerned about what is or is not happening in terms of a discourse or dialogue on the proposed new education policy. I think this is a matter of great concern, even for those of us in Mahila Samakhya, because there is absolutely no engagement, no attempt to reach out to civil society groups to participate in this debate.

To give you a little background... The term 'mahila samakhya' means women speaking with equal voice, and the programme stemmed out of the 1986 National Policy on Education. When you are talking about engagement with the public education system, the context and historical junctures need to be understood clearly. Mahila Samakhya was designed in 1986, emerging out of a decade-long struggle of civil society and women's organizations with the government, engaging with and supporting the government on various issues relating to women. That was the International Decade of Women, and this was followed by the formulation of the new education policy.

In the early 1980s, two things happened as a result of

this engagement with the government. One, a recognition that a lot of the work which had to be done, particularly in terms of women's rights and empowerment, required legislative and executive action. You could not afford to maintain a distance from government. Some of you will recall that soon after the Emergency, civil society organizations had a lot of discomfort in engaging with the government. But through the later 70s and 80s, many women's groups recognized the need to work with and within the government to try and bring about some change.

It is this background that also informed a very critical paragraph that was introduced into the new education policy, where for the first time the policy actually made a statement recognizing that the centuries-old discrimination against women required education, and that education would be used as an "instrument of change". These are the actual words that have been used in the document.

Interestingly, Mahila Samakhya, which was designed soon after the policy came into existence, picked up almost verbatim the objectives embedded in the policy, in terms of the kind of approach and strategies that would be required to talk about women's empowerment and education in India.

The issue of women's and girls' education is not a new topic. It was very central to all the debates taking place at the end of the 19th century and early 20th century, when we were talking about the formation of a new, modern Indian state. So there is a very long thread to it. However, the question that arose in the 1980s was, after Independence, despite the investments made, why have women lagged behind? The key turning point – both in terms of the debate and formulation of the policy, as well as the design of interventions to address identified gaps – was a very famous report written in the 70s, called 'Towards Equality'. This was the first report that actually scanned the whole country across various parameters to assess where women stood. And its findings were extremely alarming.

That is one side of the story. The second side is that we tend to underestimate that political formations as well as key individuals who are in positions of power do make a difference. At least in the case of Mahila Samakhya, having Anil Bordia as Education Secretary and Narasimha Rao – who on most accounts never took great decisions – as MHRD (Ministry of Human Resource Development) Minister at that time made a difference, and also the fact that almost all the key figures of the women's movement played an important role in engaging with the government to design this project.

Two messages were given to the government – that if you want

to talk about reaching out to the most marginalized women, about their education, two things are required. One, you need to rethink what education for marginalized women would mean. Two, you need to completely rethink the structural mechanism through which you are going to be able to reach out to them. Out of those debates and discussions, Mahila Samakhya was formulated. Again for the first time in the Indian government, two women from outside the government – Srilatha Batliwala and Vimala Ramachandran – were hired as consultants, and they designed the Mahila Samakhya programme after wide consultations across the country.

Initially, there was the question of where a programme like this should be located. If you remember, the Department of Woman and Child Welfare also came into existence around 1985, and there was a big debate saying that this programme logically fitted in there. But then finally, the educationists won saying that what was being attempted was enabling an education process that would help poor women to be empowered, and thereby also play a key role in the education of their daughters and their children in the long run.

It required a redefinition of education. And you would be happy to know that what they came up with in the mid-80s is something which all of us are struggling with and trying to do within the school education sector – that education is a learning process. A process whereby the learner is enabled to question, analyse, understand, seek information and – as we were talking about adult women here – to make informed choices and decisions on where they want to head.

Three features were very significant in the design of the project. One, there were no targets, since this was a learning programme. Two, being a woman-centred programme, no agendas would be set because the agenda was education for empowerment – it was not a health or HIV-AIDs or nutrition programme. Three, that the systemic and structural arrangements of the programme were essentially to play a facilitating rather than a direct implementing role, enabling or creating an environment that helped poor women to come together to think, plan, whatever they want to do.

I went from the University of Hyderabad on a lien to Mahila Samakhya, starting the programme in Andhra Pradesh. I had no clue of what was going to happen on the ground. Within the first month, 50 different issues came up, around which I was supposed

to design a learning programme. The key idea of the programme was that the women would identify an issue and you had to design a critical learning process around that issue. So in one village, it could be gastroenteritis, in the next village it could be the teacher not coming, or in the third that they don't have access to minor forest produce. How do you convert these multiple issues into a learning process within a very micro-level context of the village?

What is amazing is that this was actually pushed through by the government – that it agreed to a programme with no targets, a broad agenda called empowerment, and a facilitative programme. Most importantly, I should emphasize that they designed a programme where almost all the people who worked in it – people like me and Prasanthi – who were not from government, found space within it. This was a very, very important decision, to say that this could not be done within the structures of government as it existed, so you need to create spaces. These spaces today have led to a programme in, I think, 11 states, in some 45,000 villages across the country. Pardon me, I don't know the current numbers. But basically everybody, from the Project Director downwards, is a woman from outside government.

One of the things that the programme managed to do – which I think all of us have learnt from our own experiences with civil society organizations – is not to lay down strict prescriptions in terms of qualifications and experience. Because the moment you say you want an IIM/MBA/Masters degree, you are excluding people who can actually work in the very difficult circumstances that exist. That decision enabled a large number of women to come into the programme, and during the course of it, to get educated themselves.

One of the original objectives – there were six or seven broad ones – was to create alternative learning opportunities for girls who were out of school. So it was very much within the ambit of the school education sector. But given the fact that it was supposed to be a programme driven by agendas that women set, the issue of girls' education, in most states, came up after five-six years of consistent work with the adult women. Today, in almost all the Mahila Samakhya states, the work with adolescent or out-of-school girls is on a par with what is done with adult women.

Now this is something in which there was no pressure from the government because it was a non-targeted programme. However, things change – we all know that. The programme started in the 7th Plan. Up to most of the 10th Plan, Mahila Samakhya led a happy life. They had dedicated resources and no interference. We had – some

of you may remember – Dr Vaidyanath Iyer, who was also in the Education Ministry, who said that what a Mahila Samakhya type of programme requires is benign neglect. Give them money and forget about them. All of us would like to be in that position!

But things have changed. This is an externally aided project. Project funds ended. DFID (Department for International Development, UK) came in with new funding. The educational scenario had changed completely in the country. The 90s were the decade of the DPEP (District Primary Education Programme) and subsequently the SSA (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan). We are entering into the decade where we are driven by the MDGs (Millennium Development Goals). All of it had a reflection on Mahila Samakhya in two ways. We had to report on Mahila Samakhya in Parliament annually, and issues arose. That there was too much of a mystique around women's empowerment and we needed to now start quantifying it – that it had been there for 15-20 years, so what change had we brought about? We never ask that question of the system – even after 50 years we never ask them about the impact and outcome it has had.

The questions raised were: If you are a women's empowerment programme, have you changed the educational scenario in your district? Have all the women become literate? Are all children in school? Are all children transiting to the next level of education? Are teachers regular? The list went on and on.

This was a challenge for the programme, and it actually raised fundamental issues: How do you assess a learning process programme? How would you actually come up with indicators and measures to say what is happening? After 15-20 years, you could argue that things are happening, it is a process that takes time. But processes need to result in something.

They are results, no doubt: the age of marriage has advanced; child marriages have been stopped; the children of all the women engaged with the programme go to school, and many of them go on to secondary and higher secondary school; violence has come down. We can demonstrate and establish the fact that these things can be done.

However, the environment in the country today is to assess education and educational outcomes in terms of quantifiable numbers and something that can be certified. I think – maybe I am wrong and I would be very happy to be educated by you – we do not yet have the effective tools really to asses, let us say, what would be the empowerment of a Dalit girl going to school up to

Class 8. I will be able to talk about attendance, regularity, ASER's test, and whether she came in the 95 per cent quartile or not. But her ability to engage with a fairly hostile environment like the school, where she faces inequities, disparities and discrimination at every stage – how do we measure that? That is precisely the issue we were trying to grapple with.

Today, Mahila Samakhya is at a major crossroad. I began saying that context matters, and the conjunctures of history matter. Today the future of Mahila Samakhya hangs in abeyance. One is not very sure whether it will continue, if funding will continue, or what is going to happen to this programme. But I think it also raises a lot of questions in terms of what exactly is happening on issues of equity, gender and education.

Again, I do not want to carry coal to Newcastle, especially with this audience, but I personally believe that all those of you engaged in school education – and some of you have been pioneers in this field, and there for a very long time – need to deepen your engagement at the community level as well. As older girls come into school – let us say into the upper primary and secondary levels, for instance – issues that have nothing to do with academics are becoming the core barriers they face, in terms of eve teasing, sexual harassment and innuendo… These are topics we really don't talk about, but these are likely to become the major barriers for girls continuing in school.

So in that sense, I would say, our experience has been that a deep engagement with women – and men now – from marginalized communities is the bedrock on which you can build the future of the education of their children. Working only in the school, or on textbooks, without engaging at the community level, in my view is only half the picture. Thank you.

P Prasanthi: I want to pick up from where Kameshwari left, to speak from my experience of working with Mahila Samakhya, with children, women, the community, schools and the government.

As she said, Mahila Samakhya is positioned in a very unique set-up. It is quasi-governmental. All the functionaries are on contract, coming from the community and from educational institutions. At the community level, the basis for its activities is the Sangha. This is a collective of women from the most marginalized communities in rural and tribal areas. The prime criteria for selecting a village are low female literacy rate and low social development indicators. We pick up those districts first and start the programme in the

mandals. I am talking about Mahila Samakhya in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, where a mandal is like a block.

When we start a programme in a mandal, we try to cover it entirely because many of the most marginalized people live in remote communities where, generally, administration or development does not reach. We start our programme from there. In Andhra Pradesh and Telangana combined, we cover 15 districts – including 131 mandals, around 4,500 villages, with 2,76,000 women as members in 7,000-odd Sanghas at the village level. We also work with adolescents, forming them into Bala Sanghas – boys and girls together, from 10 to 18 years. There is an age limit for boys, 16 years, after which they go on to youth groups. There are about one lakh adolescents as members in Bala Sanghas.

We also have Mahila Shikshana Kendras, residential programmes for adolescent girls who have not been able to access formal education, who could not continue after Class 2 or 3. This is a place where they get life skills education. We also try to facilitate the continuing of their education in formal schools after the completion of the course in a Mahila Shikshana Kendra.

We have adult literacy centres that are converted into learning centres at the community level for non-literate adult women. We have 805 adult literacy centres with 12,700-odd learners. Earlier, we used to have many more – over 2,500 centres. But now we have started working with existing systems of the government, like the adult education department, Saakshar Bharat programme and so on. We try to work in convergence with the department so that the system gets used to working with gender perspectives in identifying and addressing the needs articulated by women, and have made some inroads into that.

In MS, education is seen as empowerment of women, which is a critical precondition for the participation of women and girls in educational processes. Women's priorities for learning are respected. Some women may not want to continue their education after literacy. I would say, we don't start from literacy at all. We start from a discussion on their needs, their position, their condition in the community and in the family, and the needs of their routine life in the family. The discussions continue till they find a solution to the issue, and keywords are picked up for starting to read and write. It is converted into a literacy session.

Every forum where women gather we see as a literacy session, start the process of learning from Sangha meetings and

trainings and take it to the point of literacy. Creation of time and space for reflection is the most important factor, as well as respect for uniqueness. We build on existing individual capacities, enabling the participation of women collectives in educational activities within the village and mandal, whether it is school or non-formal education, or the activities taken up by the education officers in the community.

To initiate gender-sensitive education the Sangha intervenes in schools as SMC (School Management Committee) members, academic monitoring committee members and even as parents. They participate in school activities, sit in the classroom, and observe the process of teaching-learning. Abuse or discrimination, the treatment of girls in the classroom... all this is observed by the Sangha, raised in the meetings of school committees, and discussed with the teachers to overcome it.

We also have to create an enabling environment for girls and women in the community because girls, after a particular stage, are not allowed to move far from the village to access higher education, or even upper primary school. So mobilizing the community has to be the first step, for them to accept that a girl can go to a remote school located about ten kilometres away.

Put in the form of a circle, this is how we see education: identifying the problem in a collective and developing awareness – what it is, how it has come about; analysing the problem and accessing information to overcome it; finding solutions and taking collective decisions that are put into action; and then reflection. All of this is seen as a learning and empowering process for the women.

Our perspective on education is that we value the understanding and the lived reality of women and girls. All the processes try to build their self-esteem so that they can move towards empowerment. We understand that they are marginalized in many ways, deprived of information and opportunities within the home, community and outside, socialized through a reinforced patriarchal value system right from the cradle, and bear the brunt of societal pressures everywhere.

We reject rote learning and blind obedience to values and systems. Our approach is creating a demand for literacy, otherwise it is not seen as an important factor. When we say 'literacy', it is more than education. It combines information and awareness along with reading-writing skills and numeracy. Creating a demand for education takes a long time, going by our experience. We give respect for women's priorities for learning. As I said, we don't

start from reading, writing and numeracy, but look at whatever information they feel like being aware of. We start from there and take them towards a literacy process. We also look at creating time and spaces for reflection on the processes of learning.

In all our educational interventions, whether for children, adolescents or adults, the modules or curricula are based on the National Curriculum Framework. We evolve a framework that is flexible, and can be changed according to the needs of the community and according to the context of where the centre is being started. The strategies used are mobilization of not just the non-school-going children or girls but also of the community, the family, the child and the system – as something comprehensive. We do PLAs (Participatory Learning and Action) to identify the needs of the people and initiate strategies accordingly. It can vary from a literacy centre to a three-month or one-year residential course, or one- or two-day mobilization camps.

An integrated approach to children and local bodies, involving panchayats and PRI (Panchayati Raj Institute) members, also forms an important approach. The implementing bodies are the Sangams and federations. Sangams are configured at the mandal level – apex bodies that take care of the needs of the entire mandal through the Sanghas. They become partners in the implementation of these interventions along with Mahila Samakhya. In addition to the Education Department, there is convergence with systems like the Open School and NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) – for example, seeing if we can include literacy in the NREGA system.

In each village, there are groups of 20-25 members coming together to access work. Many of them are not literate, and don't understand measurement, the calculation of payment. As a starting point we have started educating them on these aspects. So forums such as these are used for creating a demand for literacy, after which they move to literacy centres.

Networking with other agencies and NGOs in that location for strengthening the initiatives is also important. Some alternatives we started later turned into full-fledged interventions – for example, the Mahila Shikshana Kendras which were started way back in 1989-90 are being introduced in all the states now. The present KGBVs (Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas) are the outcome of the Mahila Shikshana Kendras. The model for the Saakshar Bharat programme is also an outcome of the Mahila Samakhya programme. Bala Sanghas are important

transformation points where boys and girls – both out-of-school and in-school – come together to address their issues and understand their rights, and they play a major role in addressing child marriage, child labour and gender inequalities. They are supported by the Sanghas and their implementing agencies.

Enrolment drives and campaigns are part of the interventions. All the girls who have passed out of the Mahila Shikshana Kendras or Bala Sanghas are brought together to share their experiences, talk to each other and support each other in continuing the process of education or empowerment. There are also career guidance workshops.

These are some outcomes in numbers:

- Literate women in sanghams –90,503
- Sangham women in Open University: 429
- Learning centres –804; learners –12,764
- Women in open schools –5,587 (SSC –4,620, Intermediate -967)
- Passed out girls from MSKs –5,690
- Girls appeared for SSC –110
- MSK graduates pursuing higher studies –2,170
- Total enrolment & retention villages –1,449
- Total literacy villages –38

I want to flag a few issues here. Our interventions within schools and with the community about schools have resulted in reviving zero-strength schools. More than 90 such schools were revived with the participation of the community and Sanghas, and advocacy with the teachers. Parents went to the private schools and spoke to the teachers, who went to the community and convinced them that children would be given sufficient quality time education. They made a resolution with the panchayat members, and those schools were revived.

The Envision Programme of the Government of India has been implemented through Mahila Samakhya. Through that, we can directly work with more than 12,000 schools in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, intervening in the regular system of a routine teaching-learning process. There is teaching in these schools, but no learning. So we tried to build an environment within the school for participatory learning.

We all know that ABL (Activity Based Learning) is an important feature not always used by teachers. We started with the activities of just planting, or soakage pits and gardening, moving towards

education and creating an interest among the girls and boys to come to school regularly. From there, they were taken outside to other areas to see how an ATM machine works, how a fire station works, how a bank works... The children found it interesting and this encouraged them to continue their education. These initiatives also helped parents to understand the importance of education.

These are some of the experiences of Mahila Samakhya, working with community and schools and government. It is not easy for us to be placed in the government but not be a formal part of it – a strange position of wearing both hats. When we go to communities, they see us as the government. When we go to the Sanghas, they see us as their friends, non-government. When we go to the government, they don't see us as government. It is a difficult and tricky position. We are criticized by the government for being a part of it yet encouraging the community to question it and make demands.

So that is the uniqueness of Mahila Samakhya, which is yielding very good results in terms of making women and girls venture out, bringing them into leadership, and facilitating the process of empowerment. Thank you.

Ankur Sarin: My task is very easy. All I have to say is everything that they said is true! I really do think that evaluators should never be allowed to present whatever they seem to have found without somebody from the implementing team being there – it is great that this has been ensured. Maybe they should also not be allowed to present without an external evaluator there.

Having said that, the evaluation of the Mahila Samakhya programme was an extremely difficult task. What are they? Who are they? Even they have an identity complex, in some sense, and so does the government. They don't have any targets. They don't have any pre-defined outcomes. So it's not easy to just take our measuring hats and measure, measure, measure, and then tell them, "This is what you are supposed to be doing, this is where you are and, well, that's the evaluation."

On the other hand, it has been easy because I have not come across such a large group of people involved in running a programme in such a self-critical, reflective manner. We don't need to point out to them where they might not be doing very well – they have already thought about it, been questioning that themselves. All we need to do is give them our own answers.

So having prefaced my evaluation, I will talk some numbers

in the course of my presentation. They completely do not capture the richness of the programme, but in the world we live in numbers seem to be essential for everything. So I have put up some numbers, but with these strong caveats.

The methodology for collecting our data for evaluation was an email survey of all 120 District Programme Coordinators. These were sort of independent, and we asked them to fill up the surveys in consultation with as many people as possible. Some of the things we asked for in the survey were: the dimensions on which they thought they should be evaluated; how they thought they were doing on those dimensions; how many Sanghas in the districts in which they were operating were truly active – highly active, moderately active and weakly active.

I am still quite impressed that they self-reported that a third of their Sanghas were weakly active – it is remarkable for an external evaluator to get this kind of self-reflective feedback. There are different reasons for that – some of the Sanghas are new, some just didn't probably have a latent demand for them.

In addition, we did field level data collection from four states. Two districts within each state were selected with contrasting levels of autonomy. One of the things that I think was not mentioned was this idea of withdrawal. This programme takes its quest for autonomy and empowerment so seriously that, in its own design, it has talked about how it is going to withdraw. It doesn't want to create new structures dependent on it, so there is a system of withdrawing from the Sanghas, from the districts. And one of the things happening while we were evaluating last year was this phase of withdrawal in many districts.

Those are the two contrasting levels of autonomy. The Sanghas are classified into three categories – old and mature with more autonomy, moderately strong, and relatively new. The last category has the Sanghas which still have some financial ties with the Mahila Samakhya programme. The rest are not getting any funds at all – yet they continue to be a part of this larger family, doing the kind of things that have been described.

From each category, three Sanghas were selected, randomly – nine Sanghas in each district. So a total of 72 Sanghas were visited by us. I think we – I refer to my colleagues at the Ravi Mathai Centre for Education – visited eight or ten districts/Sanghas ourselves, going into each of those in detail, in addition to employing data collection agencies. So some of this data has been collected by external agencies, but when we went we had in-depth discussions.

Ours was not a sort of enumeration task – it was much more qualitative. In this process, we also collected the profiles of 802 Sangha members who took part in the discussions in the 72 Sanghas.

When we went out to a Sangha in a village in UP, a group started talking. When external actors come, you can expect them to talk a little more than they would normally. There is some excitement, some inhibition. One woman started enacting this whole scene, covering her head with her sari and saying, "This is how we were. We couldn't even go out. If we had to go, we had to go hidden. And somehow things changed." We asked them to tell us what membership in the Sangha did for them, and they said, "Things changed." Everybody said that. But then somebody said, "It wasn't just anyhow. It was thought through. There was a war strategy for the change." To me, this is the part where you really start uncovering what a programme like Mahila Samakhya can do. Imagine if this opportunity is not given to women's groups, and they don't get to come into the public space!

In those meetings – I am just repeating what I heard repeatedly and what we gathered from the different points, the data sources, etc. – in those collective spaces, themes emerge as to what they would do. And each Sangha is so unique. That is why this evaluation was a very complicated task.

In 2008, when DFID came on and asked for a results framework, they set up some targets and had a whole results framework to evaluate the programme. Unfortunately, on most of those parameters, baseline data was not collected. But we used that framework to inform our evaluation study in terms of how we want to be looking at what we want to be looking at.

You can see here a very narrow subset of what we saw.

	BASELINE	TARGET	ACHIEVEMENT
DISTRICTS	83	115	130
SANGHAS	29808	46000	55402
MEMBERS	701,000	11,50,000	14,41,928
NARI ADALATS	186	250	481

But administratively, this is clearly a programme that has exceeded its own expectations, even from the simple targets that it set for itself. These are some of the parameters that are indicative of the kind of access to public institutions, public spaces and government programmes in which Mahila Samakhya has played a role. I am sure, at this point you will be asking: What is the counterfactual? What is your control group? I think those questions are important. We should be asking them. But we also know where these numbers generally are. We don't really need a control group to tell us that these are much higher than what the average numbers are. So, in that sense, I would take these numbers with a little bit of perspective. These are parameters, indicators,that definitely don't do justice to the idea of empowerment.

Kameshwari: DFID actually developed a results framework which talked in terms of the reach of the programme to the marginalized. So the parameters were slightly differently defined. But if you unpack them, you get that these are the nitty-gritties.

Prasanthi: And the results framework was not designed only by DFID, but with the participation of Mahila Samakhya members.

Ankur: This broader framework was, in some sense, used to inform our own design. That is a much larger piece. I am just going to hit on a couple of things here – what we thought were some of the strengths and finally some of the weaknesses that we perhaps see. Strength is this government ownership. One reason why Mahila Samakhya, I believe, historically also went into this model was the desire to get scale. How do you scale up something that people have worked on in different ways on a smaller scale? How do you scale that up to the entire country, or to at least the places where needed? Government ownership provides that legitimacy. It also creates tensions. We went to one of the educational secretaries who was the Chair of the Mahila Samakhya society. And he immediately said, "These are NGOs." There was a complete lack of ownership of the programme, as if to say: "Yes, this is an NGO. Naturally it will have funding problems."

So the tensions they were describing are very much there. Using that, I will quickly get to another point. One of the biggest challenges Mahila Samakhya faces is that it is considered a very small programme. I believe the 11th Plan funding, over the entire Plan, was Rs 210 crore. From the government's expenditure point

of view, it is quite a trivial amount, especially when we are talking about 16 lakh women, 11 states…

The strength of the programme is the Sangha. The women involved, and the amount of time they spend on each of these activities – getting job cards and RSBY (Rashtra Swasthya Bima Yojna) cards done, staging a dharna around the Block Development Officer because the NREGA jobs are not being provided, staging a dharna around the thana because of an incident of rape for which the FIR has not been lodged... We somehow discount all this time as if it is completely worthless. In an exercise, we took the case of Telangana. Prof. Vijaya Sherry Chand conducted this, and our estimate is that a total value of Rs 170 crore per annum is being contributed just by the volunteers.

Now, take that against what the government is actually investing. If you are looking for validation for this providing something valuable, just the fact that there is all this participation coming together in these collective spaces, mobilizing, acting towards something… If we want a number, here's the monetary value attached to it.

Vishnu: Is this across states?

Ankur: This is across states, discounting the fact that there are some Sanghas that are not completely active. We have reduced the amount of time by half.

Vishnu: This is your sample of those three-four states?

Ankur: These are our samples of three-four states. This is a particular case. We went deeper into the activities of five federations which are sort of conglomerate Sanghas. Some of the weaknesses that we see – and this is related to some of the things I have already mentioned – are that as there is growth, the ability of the Sanghas to raise their own funds and negotiate with the state government and capital based authorities gets limited. You have to remember that 90 per cent of the Sangha members are from communities that we would typically label as marginalized. These are some of the first times they are coming into public spaces.

We feel there is still a lot more work that can be done in terms of improving internal management and networking if, as it is thought, the federations will become the over-arching

body. Different federations have tried to raise funds, but not very successfully. There are exceptions. In some cases, they have created information centres for which they charge a small amount and raise some funds, in some cases Naari Adaalats (women's courts), and in some other cases some other livelihood initiatives have been tried.

Another weakness we saw was that while this programme has been great as far as schooling goes – reconceptualizing education as something which truly enhances capability and provides information – this is not ideal, or has not yet reached the capacity to become a livelihood promotion programme or deal with savings. One of the biggest challenges that Mahila Samakhya today faces is the mushrooming of these self-help groups – the micro-finance organizations.

An implication of that completely abysmal nature of funding for a programme of this sort is the very poor honorarium structure. Most honorariums – correct me if I am wrong – were set in 2008, have not been revised and are not likely to be revised. There is this nice utilization of you-are-government-you-are-not-government in saying well, you are government, but you don't qualify for PF (Provident Fund), and you don't qualify for any other social security scheme that would have been yours if you were a regular government employee. That results in a high turnover.

On the one hand, you can see it from a social point as saying it is positive because there are women who are extremely capable, whom organizations like us would love to recruit because they have been trained so nicely and their capacity is so high. But for the programme, it is a problem.

I will conclude here and take questions.

Q&A

Mansi: Ankur, in your presentation, you added a monetary value to volunteer contribution. How did you calculate it?

Ankur: First we tabulated the activities and then the amount of time different members spend on them. There is the opportunity cost of time, which is what they could have been earning during that time period. In many cases, there are travel/transportation costs because a lot of their work often takes them out from the villages into the district headquarters, except for the block headquarters. So we try to estimate all of that.

One of the activities – what is expected of a mature Sangha –

is that the women, the sahayoginis, (who are not there in every state) themselves often go out and train new Sanghas that are coming up. So we try to include all of that, and multiply that by the total number of Sanghas, the total number of members there, and that is how we reach that number.

Kameshwari: I think this is an important way to calculate and estimate the value of the work the women are doing. As you all know, very often, when it comes to women, even the work we do within the household is really not estimated and seen as something that needs to be included to calculate the GDP and so on. In the case of Mahila Samakhya, we found very often in our interactions with the government or families that they believe if women do work of this kind, they do it for themselves – so why even raise questions about how valuable it is. This is part of a much larger understanding and view on women, their labour, and so on. I found it particularly useful when I read this in the report.

Mansi: Also from an implementation perspective, all the funding is always quantified in terms of money we get from people. But voluntary contribution is so valuable to sustain projects that often it just slips under something that's coming free. So an estimation like this is of great help.

Questioner: I am from Rajasthan. I have been trying to understand, not very formally, what happened to the women's development programme in Rajasthan – how the entire group within the government went against the government and resulted in the programme changing completely – and how the state of Rajasthan is still not sorted. There is even no Mahila Samakhya in Rajasthan. I would like to understand how the Mahila Samakhya programme did not face similar challenges.

Questioner: Kameshwari, given your experience over the years seeing through the lives of these women, are the declarations of being a marginal community varied across regions? And if so, what are the differences?

Vishnu: Do you see this as a large-scale programme? Or is it small-scale, or medium?

Anjali Noronha: Have you ever wondered that this is a very unique group, where the initiative comes from inside the mandal, which is placed inside the government and has a kind of a structure? Suppose it were not housed within the government, what structures and measures would have to be taken?

Kameshwari: I think strategically, at the field level, one of the lessons that MS learnt was the need to have women's collectives, especially if you were going to be addressing difficult questions like child marriage and violence. It was a very big lesson for the women's movement – make women confident so they can stand alone and fight against deeply entrenched patriarchy.

Secondly, I think that because it was located in the Education Department and since it was accepted as a non-target programme, there was much less pressure on field workers to deliver against set targets. The moment you are located in the Department of Women and Child Welfare, there are targets to be met. That was one of the problems we had. All partnerships with the government are tricky. It is just fortunate that Mahila Samakhya survived. Because if you change the government, change the political party and change the senior bureaucrats, the scenario changes completely.

Disjunction between the central government and state government finally was the undermining factor. They converted Mahila Samkhya into a 100 per cent self-assessment project. It was set up more or less as an independent society of states, unlike the government, which worked through the Department of Women and Child Welfare although the workers came from outside.

Expansion and scale of the programme... Mahila Samakhya actually works with the National Resource Group, an advisory wing. They were totally against expansion on the grounds that if you expand, you lose quality. Mahila Samakhya is a small drop in the ocean, not visible at all. If you measure programmes by the size of the budget, this is nothing. We have NGOs in the country which have larger budgets – and I am talking about small-scale ones.

People's Science Movement

K.K. Krishna Kumar, Usha Menon

K.K. KRISHNA KUMAR has been associated with the People's Science Movement (PSM) as an activist as part of the Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishad (KSSP) since 1972 and is also involved with the and All India People's Science Network. He was also Director of the Kerala Total Literacy Campaign from 1990-1991 and was one of the founder members of the Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti (BGVS) which is one of the largest voluntary agencies in India, providing field and academic support for the implementation of Total Literacy, Post Literacy and Continuing Education throughout India.

USHA MENON is one of the founders of Jodo Gyan, a Delhi based organization working on maths education. For the last 16 years, they have been working to develop innovative curriculum for primary and upper primary level. She has also worked as a scientist and researcher at organizations such as National Institute of Science, Technology and Development Studies. She has been associated with the science and literacy movements and has been part of the Delhi Science Forum.

K.K. Krishna Kumar: Our pretension at one point of time was that we had tried to do everything possible to change society. Now we realize that nothing of the sort happened!

The People's Science Movement started way back in 1962 with the very good intention of taking science to people. Science should be a tool in the hands of people to understand, analyse and know how things work – not imprisoned in laboratories or universities. It has to be taken to the people. Some say that we – by this is mean the Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishad – started the People's Science Movement but, as always, some don't agree with this claim.

Anyway, we started as a group of science writers who came together and decided that we would have a large number of popular science books in the regional language, Malayalam. That was the time when people thought that not only science but anything serious had to be discussed and debated only in English. We believed you could be serious in your mother tongue too. We tried the regional language with a lot of things, like material, books... Publishers were not willing to publish Malayalam science books, so we had to start our own magazine, our own publication house. Now people are asking for them. Especially in Kerala, every private publisher is willing to publish them, and a large number of science books are being published. These are all good changes.

Slowly, as we went along, we found that writing and reading science alone was not going to be of much use. You have to apply it to life. This actually started with the teachers. At one point, there were some major issues where we were trying to – or were forced to – intervene. One was in the area of environment, where lots of things were happening. This was way back in 1962, around the time of the Stockholm Conference. There was talk about environmental degradation even then, and we were concerned about that.

These talks were taking place at our level – the intellectual, academic level – but also in villages, which we heard through teachers. We had started trying to intervene in science education – not education as a whole, only science. Science is very interesting, but in education it was being made as boring as possible. Many science enthusiasts found that very curious. Science is everywhere. You don't have to go to a laboratory to see it. It is very difficult not to see science. But, with great difficulty, teachers were making it so boring that in the 10th or 11th Standard, whenever they could, children were throwing out their textbooks.

So we intervened, starting with Science Clubs which were not there at that time. Teachers were interested. We gave a lot of inputs, activity based. We learnt slowly, from whoever was doing similar things, like Eklavya. As we went along, many other things happened. We introduced Science Talent tests in the primary schools – not the bigwig Science Talent tests but simple, ordinary, village level ones. A large number of teachers and students started participating. There used to be a science quiz on the radio at that time.We started quizzing in village schools.

Making science more interesting was originally the objective. When teachers started coming into the movement, they brought the village ambience, the real society, into the organization. Their problems were very different. For them, pollution was not on paper – it was out there. Newly started factories were polluting their wells. The first complaint was about a factory dyeing threads near Ernakulam that was polluting the entire area. The teachers came and asked us, "What do we do?" We tried to go and talk to the management and they said, "Who are you to talk to us? You can teach science in your school. We are big shots. We also have moustaches..." We were scared and couldn't do anything. Then we understood that if we really wanted to take science to people, it was going to be dangerous.

Another method was to hold classes in the villages. We were all youngsters, just out of engineering college. So we had this we-know-everything kind of attitude. We'd go and speak in technicalities. They would understand nothing, but still we would speak 'science' to them! After a while we understood that they knew a lot – sometimes more than us. So we occasionally had to say that we didn't know many things, which is very difficult for an educated person, especially if you have an MSc or PhD. "I don't know" is a very difficult phrase for knowledgeable people to utter!

We faced difficulties but slowly started mingling. We started

'dirtying' science. People said we were mixing politics with science. We would have loved to have kept politics out of science, but there was no way. You all must be experiencing the same thing with education. There is a lot of complexity – whether it is science or education – unless you recognize there is politics in it. Kameshwari was talking about individuals who matter. Of that I am sure – they do matter. I remember the day Anil Bordia retired, I got a message from someone in the Directorate of Adult Education: "Go tell the folks at BGVS that Anil Bordia has retired." It really mattered. I have worked under Narasimha Rao with Anil Bordia, Arjun Singh with Anil Bordia... Then Murli Manohar Joshi came and all kinds of things began to happen though we tried to pretend that nothing was happening.

We have tried to do almost everything to take education and science to people. Initially, we started intervening from the outside – Science Clubs, magazines, making science interesting… Then we understood that there was no point in talking about science education alone. You have to talk about the entire science of education. So we expanded the scope and started looking at education in its totality. Once we did that, we realized that things were not as they appeared from outside. There were many components within it, an internal and external structure.

We had to deal with privatization and commercialization. It was there those days, and now too. We had to face questions to do with quality of education and activity based education, interesting terms like child-centric, new pedagogy... We evolved many things and instituted two major People's Commissions for education. One was headed by Ashok Mitra, none other than the ex- Finance Minister of West Bengal – he headed the Kerala Education Commission. We came out with a large number of recommendations, and handed them over to the LDF government of that time. EMS Namboodiripad, the main person in the LDF, said they would accept it as a government report even though the Commission had been appointed by a non-governmental organization. But the government teachers' organization said no.

Ashok Mitra was not surprised because the Commission report which he had prepared for West Bengal was still under lock and key. Nobody had seen it – in his Bengal, where he was a minister – because there were vested interests on the right, and vested interests on the left. In Kerala, it was left-right, left-right vested interests. So it was very difficult.

Many things we were arguing for are now part of what we

call the school system. For example, Science Clubs – you don't have to start them outside now. Science talent tests – KSSP now conducts them every year, with the government. So most of the things that we were doing with great difficulty – clandestinely taking science to schools through alternate channels – are now official, and we are very happy.

Are we really very happy? No. The problem is that there is a problem with mainstreaming. Many of these things have been very well mainstreamed. But mainstreaming is also a good word for taming. The moment you mainstream, you also tame. We have this experience with literacy. This is one area where we have made big interventions – effectively. The Total Literacy Campaign in the time of Anil Bordia enabled us to do that. It was a huge thing.There may be debate about various aspects of that. But the manner in which people were involved was not just involvement but creative intervention of the community in education. It was not imposed. The teaching methodology, the time when it should be conducted, the kind of primer that they should be taught – everything was done by the people. And people proved that they were able to do it. They can do much more.

How do you bring back this creative intervention of the community? It is going to be an eternal question in the hearts of those working in every aspect of education. The teacher is only one component of education. The Education Department is only one component. The greatest aspect is the community. I can say from experience that you won't see such creativity anywhere else. It has solutions for everything. There were situations where we couldn't take literacy classes in certain communities because of gender and all kinds of religious beliefs etc. So we went and met the elders, and they come out with solutions that really worked.

The SMC (School Management Committee) as part of the Right to Education (RTE) is a symbol of the manner in which you can bring in the community. But it is also an example of taming. What is the SMC now? There is nothing like democracy in most of them. The headmaster decides.

I have seen two kinds of SMCs. In Jharkhand you see one kind. There is village politics and one set of people decide that they will be the SMC. So they take over the school. The teachers teach whatever the SMC says – not in the positive but in the negative sense – because those people rule the school and even the teacher is under them. In the other kind, the teacher decides who can be the SMC, and that is why you have very interesting combinations – the

father and mother of the best child become SMC members! How do you ensure that an SMC is democratic? You cannot, because it came as a bolt from the blue. Society was not prepared for that.

We have worked a lot with various aspects of the RTE – formulation, campaigning, and all kinds of things. It was a most half-hearted policy decision. Nobody in the government really wanted it. It somehow came, which is good. But in the government you cannot always expect to get something you really want. You have to learn with whatever you have.

I was saying just this morning that they will definitely ban and change textbooks. It happened with our literacy case. The programme was going very well. Each district made its own primer, related to local culture. In the colliery areas, there was something about 'kala sona' – black gold, coal. But we had to also talk about what was happening there with non-contracted labour and so on, and people became angry. In Andhra Pradesh, one of the reasons for the anti-arrack agitation was a small lesson in one of the literacy primers. It flared up and spread across. So it is difficult to conduct a literacy programme without making people angry. Literacy is very nice from outside, but when you look closely it is not so innocent. You cannot do an innocent literacy programme.

We all got into literacy because of one sentence in the campaign's main leaflet: Literacy is for understanding the reasons for your backwardness and organizing against it. This was the National Literacy Mission's (NLM) objective, printed and published by the Ministry of Human Resource Development. That is why we were all there, not just to teach letters. But then, slowly, they withdrew that leaflet. They brought in a restriction that the primers need not be made locally but by the SRCs (State Resource Centres) under the instruction of the Education Department. No local primer is available now.

So the spaces within the government are very tricky. In the coming days one lesson we will have to learn is to play within these spaces. They will become more and more limited. You can be negative, pessimistic, and say nothing is possible anywhere. How can you be positive in absolutely negative spaces? Education is one area where you can do that. You may be told what kind of textbooks you can use. But the moment you hold the textbook, you can decide what you can do with it. This is one thing we will all have to do. There cannot be any universal solution.

Yesterday, when I left Kerala, the results of the latest SSLC

examination were out. This time, the pass percentage was 95.7. And the debate is on – is the result genuine? Some people are saying it is not because Kerala, as I said, is a left-right place – five years Left government, five years Right. Every time, the party in power has to prove it is better than the previous one, so one inside view is that the present Education Minister decided that there should be a five per cent increase in the pass percentage. That is one thing.

The second thing is that the experts are wondering how 95 per cent of the children can pass, because it means that even very ordinary children are becoming A-graders. The upper middle class do not like that. They want their children to pass, and also want some others to fail. How do you tackle this mentality?

There is this interesting thing called Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation. We have been talking about it since the beginning of education, and we feel victorious that it is now officially, formally recognized. But what kind of continuous and comprehensive evaluation is taking place? No one knows. There are very few schools where it is really understood and done properly. It has become teacher-centric. They look at a child and decide that this one is slow, this one might become good at sports and so on. On the basis of a visual assessment they fill up the extra-curricular column in the CBSE form. The child may have never ever seen a football, but the teacher decides here is a potential football player.

One major thing we are facing and fighting is privatization and commercialization. Theoretically, if you look at the RTE, commercialization is not possible. In Kerala, what is happening in the name of RTE is that the number of private schools has increased. RTE says that there can be other schools, but they should be approved by a body. So the government quickly set up a body for approval, and all the schools that had been denied it earlier were granted approval. We used to call them'unrecognized schools'. Now they are all recognized schools. They don't have to have an SMC because they are not under the purview of RTE – and the upper middle class, the lower middle class, all want to send their children to these schools.

I will go back for a minute to my school and my village – a very interior village in the Palghat district of Kerala. It used to be called a Harijan Welfare School, basically meant for children belonging to that community. But then slowly everybody started going there. The word 'Harijan' was cut off, making it a 'Welfare School'. That was the only school in that area. I belonged to a middle class family and I used to go there. That was the unifying place for every child in that

area, from all communities. There was no to talk about caste or religion or anything. It was an absolutely equalizing place.

I go back now to my village to understand the manner in which primary education is functioning. The first school bus comes at 5 o'clock in the morning. It goes 10-15 km away to a very posh private school. The children– appropriately dressed in sparkling ties and so on – take this bus. So they are the first grade children. The second bus comes by about 7 o'clock. It goes to a nearby town called Pattambi, to a convent school. The second set of children goes there. The third set goes to an adjacent village where there is an ordinary English-medium school.

After that, the poorest, most backward children, who have no other alternative, go to my beautiful school. It is really beautiful now, I must tell you. When the SSA came, all the schools got funds for beautification. Now, externally, my school looks very beautiful but nobody wants to look at it. At the time when we were studying, there was nothing beautiful about it.It was a very shabby, ordinary school, but we used to love it. There was the beauty of the heart at that time. The teachers were nice. We were all wanted. The atmosphere was beautiful. Now the external appearance is very beautiful, but children don't want to go there.

All kinds of things are happening in Kerala villages, as they are happening in the rest of the country. The point is that, at one level, we have achieved many things. Much of these have been mainstreamed. But there is commercialization, with all kinds of schools. Parents say, "We are willing to pay. Please take us away from this dirty government school. We don't want to mix with children of that kind."

How do you deal with that? English medium. For ages, we have been trying to argue that we are not saying that English should not be taught. It should be taught – nicely – but the medium of instruction should be the mother tongue. People don't agree. They say that all the rich children, the so-called 'better' children, go to English medium schools, and that to say that the rest should not send their children there too is a conscious conspiracy to keep them down. We also see that those who have achieved something, reached a high level, have all gone through an English education.

How do we deal with this problem? What is our larger understanding about the medium of instruction? Theoretically, I know it very well: comprehension, cognition, mother tongue, natural thought. I can write a very good essay on it, and have

written several. But I am not able to convince the people. It is a struggle for government schools to survive, and one survival technique is that from nursery to high school, English medium divisions are made available.

I recently went to a very interior village where admissions were on. The teacher told me that admissions to English medium were more than to Malayalam medium. This was near Varkala, very much in the interior. People who are struggling to live all want their children to study in the English medium. These issues are sometimes not addressed in discussions. We know what good education is. We know methods of child-centric education, teacher training and so on. But when it comes to the most crucial thing – the parent or the community – we are not willing to look into it.

I remember one occasion where some of the best discussions took place in Kerala. People from DPEP (District Primary Education Programme) had come. Initially, we were confused about DPEP. We were against it because it was funded by World Bank. Dangerous! It was bound to get troublesome. We in Kerala are very political, so we were very, very resistant. But we understood that whether we liked it or not, it was going to happen. Then we changed our tactics and decided that as many resource persons as possible from our organization should enter DPEP. So we sort of infiltrated, and it helped. We contributed willingly to all the textbooks that came out of the DPEP process because we accepted that method. It created a long term impacton textbooks, curriculum and so on, starting from the national level curriculum change discussion in 2005 and even before that.

Soon after all this, one bunch of so-called eminent educationists formed an association and started propagating against DPEP. They said that for children to be out of the classroom and so on was fashionable, but against education. That was the time when, for about six months, everybody on the road, in the house, community and tea shops was discussing education. Bertolt Brecht's Galileo says, a time will come when milkmaids will talk about moons and suns. Like that, everybody in the village was talking about education.

I look forward to that kind of time again. Everybody knows about the RTE, except for those for whom it was created. We all can talk for hours about it, but the guy in the village does not know about it even now. So how do you create a situation where all of us work together? Some of you may be experts in evaluation, some in English teaching, and some may be looking at detail. But there should also be a movement. Today, especially, when all currents are

against what we have been preaching and trying to do, there will have to be a movement on some of the fundamental issues. Thank you.

Usha Menon: I cut my teeth, in a sense, on the People's Science Movement. When we came into this movement, the work being done by the Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishad was a kind of beacon. It is what inspired so many of us to join in. Although in Delhi at that time we had started doing some work, what KSSP did – especially the way they linked to the people, went into villages and talked about different things – was a major inspiration.

Of course, another major point in the evolution of the People's Science Movement was the 1987 jatha (parade),in which many groups who wanted to do something, to take science to the people, came together. Organizations were initiated in many states of India – Punjab, Bihar and other places – forming a network with a perspective. Jathas went to four different parts of India, one of which culminated in Bhopal, where there was a big ceremony. Many of the people who were there are now sitting here!

From the jatha came many organizations which connected and engaged with different types of problems in each state, maybe very differently in each place. In Delhi we got involved with a lot of the policy issues. Immediately after the Bhopal gas tragedy, many of my colleagues in the Delhi Science Forum went there to investigate and came out with a report that played a very important role in later developments. Other issues related to patents, to different aspects of intellectual property and seed import policy, which have implications on lives of people. But more importantly, in different states, different types of organizations came up. Even before the literacy movement started, these organizations got engaged with people's problems. In that sense, they were a follow-up to the movement across the world in the 70s, talking about science for the people – that science was being used for a narrow group interest and there was a need for a movement.

If I look back upon the People's Science Movement, two aspects stand out. One is voluntarism – the fact that people came in even after being part of the government, as in Mahila Samakhya. Being born outside, in a sense, and continuing through voluntarism to engage with problems – this has been one of the important inspiring aspects of the movement.

Another was the attitude towards science itself. It was seen as a liberating force, because it introduced critical thinking, enquiry and the role of evidence – not just going by what has been given. But there was this idea that we need to take science to the people. Science for the people, science to the people – how do we go about it? This was the question that came up among people from different professions – engineers, doctors, and other degree holders – who got involved with it in order to take it forward.

In the case of KSSP, local language publishing played a very important role. I would like to pause a little and talk about this aspect. In one sense, looking at science as a liberating force that introduces critical inquiry was an inheritance of the enlightenment period, which has been very seriously questioned also by the coming of post-modernism and many other kinds of movements. But in our country, 'What is the role of Science?' and 'How do we look at Science?' – these continue to be important discussions which have not been rounded off by coming to any kind of conclusion, just set aside.

It is also important to look at – and make a distinction between – science and technology. I find that a lot of the discussions or opinions about science are coloured by the opinion or understanding or evaluation of technology. With technology you have a particular goal to achieve. For example, how do I produce electricity for so many people with something at this rate? And there is a very specific kind of an end result which is being expected. That demands a specific technological solution. But when we talk about science, we are not talking about how. We are really talking about the why of it –why things happen. We are trying to generalize the experience.

I am saying this because even in our country, a lot of the discussion on the sociology of knowledge – people talking about science – is actually about technology and not about science. I know this will take us into a different debate, but I think it is important to mention it. We think of science as an empowering, liberating force, but its relevance is to our situation and how we can take it to the people are important questions.

When we talk about the People's Science Movement, especially after the 1991 Gyan-Vigyan jatha, the literacy movement really becomes a major kind of a force. If the Science Movement and 1987 jatha inspired more educated people, the '91 jatha really spread it out. In Shakarpur, where I was involved, we could see the way volunteers, ninth standard dropouts and other people,were coming in order to be able to make people literate.

So the amount of energy – the force – which came out of the People's Science Movement and later, in its follow-up, the literacy movement, I think is very important and perhaps unique to our kind of situation. There are also issues. We talk about how we can introduce reflexivity as part of the thinking in the Sanghas of Mahila Samakhya – everybody looked at that as a very important aspect.Similarly, we also try and think about reflexivity within our own paths and organizational affairs. And sometimes, the results or the paths that should be taken are not very clear.

The literacy movement and the People's Science Movement were large movements, like a wave. Perhaps in the life of such movements there are phases, because everyone is talking about sustainability. We are talking about the sustainability of the movement and the ailaan or proclamation which was there and which perhaps isn't there now. But the thing is, do we talk about sustainability of the phase, or do we say that there are phases in the life of movements? There are times when movements come and there are follow-up things which need to happen, whose structure, method of functioning and working perhaps has to be different. Because if we take an evolutionary kind of an approach to a movement for the people – for a better, more democratic society – movements have a role to play and so do follow-up organizations or interventions. So more thinking can give us a better grasp about the kinds of evolutionary trajectories or path lines.

Shaji and I are here from Jodo Gyan, and for us Jodo Gyan is also one of the spin-offs of the People's Science Movement, in which the focus has been, of course, education – though PSM has been much broader. In our intervention in education we came across issues which aren't simple. Do we just go to the people, take their existing knowledge and understanding and build on them further? Does this also include teachers? How do we create and develop a science that is really pro-people?

We are talking about public education. As KK so poignantly traced out, the space for working within government educational institutions is narrowing – in the literal sense, because most people are outside government schools. It is not only in Kerala, but even in Punjab that we see this. All the teachers here already know that. We need to reflect on it. Finally, for us what is important is the education people get, and what the pace is. Maybe we want to have a public system. But how do we reach there? The paths could be very different. There are many issues

like that but I want to look at one aspect, related to the way we look at knowledge creation itself. How do we go about making education more meaningful, whether you think of it as activity based or in any other way?

One of the very attractive things about Mahila Samakhya is that their Sangha sits and talks about their problems, and from there generates the issues to be taken up for enquiry. That is of course an ideal method, and necessary. But where are the tools for teachers to be able to interact in that way? If you are talking about school education, how would you know what children are feeling, what their issues are? To be able to introduce enquiry based teaching into the classroom, there are a whole lot of things we need to handle.

I think it really comes to: What is science? Is it something which you can just go out into the world and observe, generalize with a particular methodology and understand? Is it that simple? Is it a question of doing n number of experiments, end up with results and generalize on those? Or is it a process of experience, reflecting on that and generalizing? If science was such a simple thing, it would not have taken thousands of years to be able to conclude that the earth goes round the sun. Or it would not have taken thousands of years – recently they said 3000 years – to be able to invent numbers, abstract counting.

Science – and all human cognition – is very different from animal cognition and not individual based. Our learning doesn't come from one individual's experience. The moment we have language, we see the world through a whole framework and perspective – not just because of language, but other things too. So the collective social, culturally rooted nature of all human learning, and specifically science,means that the way we will have to go about doing it is very, very complex. It needs thinking.

There is a role of sharing the cultural tool of science with the next generation, but in a way in which it makes sense to them. So how do we keep sense making as one aspect, and at the same time get all the rigour of science to come in? This is a challenge.

The kind of problems one can face even when attempting to introduce such things into the current system is because the curriculum is not built that way. In spite of a lot of changes, of activity based learning, of many ways to make it interesting, the curriculum still usually starts from where it should end. We can make children do role play to see how the earth goes round the sun. But if we want to really teach children about the earth and the sun, we will have to start with the earth that is under our feet, and observe the sun we

see in the sky. Our experience has been that it takes about three years to be able to talk about the earth going around the sun. Any role play is like adding a little bit of sweetener to an otherwise meaningless picture. It's the same with almost any other topic we may take up.

Here's an example of what is perhaps needed, what we call 'reversing the inversion'. Normally, all the colourful pictures, the beautiful aesthetic drawings usually start from where we mean to end. And what we are talking about is starting with what makes sense to children. So it is anti-didactical. This is a term Hans Freudenthal used for mathematics, and is anti-education in a sense. If we take the Class 6 geography textbook, within a chapter you go from earth to the solar system, the globe. Everything happens in a few chapters. The first one goes from the earth up to the galaxy because mostly what is expected is verbal knowledge, with some amount of logical connections within that. There is hardly any space for sense making.

This way of looking at it means there is the need for a large involvement of people for each and every topic. It takes about two-three years to be able to figure out how to approach each topic – what you go with at each stage. So I think we need a People's Science Movement Version 2 involving a whole lot of people who have the right kind of background, because we are not saying that the community will teach us everything. I think many of the people who have had the fortune to go through this particular training have special meta-cognitive skills that can be applied to every topic. But of course it has to be participatory. How do we go about doing this?

For example, there is a picture of the globe that is there in all textbooks in all schools. Fortunate children have it in their homes, others at least have seen it. Now the question is, why do we show the globe this way? How do we expect a child to be able to connect to this? There are children, who after they have been told about the globe and about the earth under our feet, say, "Where is that earth, the one that is real?" We were doing a session where we were talking about dharti (earth/ground) and a boy said, "We learnt in 7th-8th Standard that it is prithvi (the planet earth). Say prithvi – you don't say dharti."

We must explain that prithvi is different from this dharti. Why do we show the earth like this? From where can it look like this? If we want to have the earth depicted, it should perhaps be like this floor. And we could say that this is a model of the earth

– now you imagine it to be very large, the way it would look from outer space. Maybe that is the view from outer space of the earth. Maybe if you look from a plane, that is the way the globe would look. To be able to make sense of the spherical nature of the earth itself is not very easy. Unless you are able to combine gravity with the shape of the earth, it is very difficult to understand or accept that it is spherical – why will people not fall off?

In every area, these general ways in which we go about things are not sufficient. Every topic, place and situation is very different. What is true in Punjab, for example, is not true in Meghalaya – these are two states that we are involved with. And I am sure this is true of all places. But the challenge– and what is inspiring – is voluntarism. How do we make that happen?

We need to work with the government. Recently, when we started in Punjab, we realized that working in one district is also problematic. You are not able to do anything because everything is decided at the state level. There seem to be more possibilities in working in the whole state. We cannot yet say, but certainly the idea of having a not too target oriented intervention could be one way. The challenge is to see how we can bring that spirit of voluntarism into the government system.

KK was saying, how do we work within the government and not continue to follow only that principle? Building up, using the space to connect with people, so that even if the person who took the initiative isn't around, there would already be some kind of a support. This is one of the factors. But there are many other things we could talk about.

Science is important. It is a question of saying, "Okay, let's do it and see." I will conclude with something we were doing with the children. At one time, Class 3 children were having a discussion about whether sea water would also freeze. One of them said, "Should we do it and see? We'll put some salt in water, put it in the freezer and see what happens." The important thing was that he said "Let's do it and see." How do we bring in that attitude?

In that sense, we still need to consider science as a liberating force. And hopefully, the People's Science Movement can go further ahead with more vigour. Thank you.

Q&A

Anjali: It was very nice to be transported back in time with KK and Usha, going back to '87 and the jatha in Bhopal. It got me thinking of

our own reactions, where we come from.

One issue to reflect upon is what KK said about 'science to the people' – the very phrase, not the intention, because a lot of what he said later on was about learning from the people, and the science that exists within the people. He said that this 'science to the people' and 'science of the people' got problematized in terms of Indian and Western science. I think that is not a correct problematization. There is a sense in which any concept, including science, is looked at from different perspectives. And the evolution of the scientific principle of questioning, of exploring, of coming to new knowledge is there in different ways. So education to the people and of the people, and how people look at education... we need to revisit that dialectic constantly.

The other thing is that Mahila Samakhya and KSSP have a lot of parallels in experience. It would be interesting to study the whole issue of expanse and deepening quality vis-à-vis a programme based within a government structure. When you talk of the spirit of volunteerism – we cannot really think of it. The state has its own coherent logic. So maybe the term 'volunteerism' within the state might be a misnomer in that sense. What happens to volunteerism when it starts getting attracted to collaborate with the state or to be placed within the state?

I think BGVS's shaalas have taken in these two very crucial aspects, that there is the need for expanses – the Joy of Learning and Literacy campaigns – and the need for structuring and sustaining over time, and bringing up issues from that sustenance in the next campaign. Both are equally important. But they become phases because the people involved in the two kinds of attempts are quite different. One is cynical of the other, saying all they did was run campaign after campaign. In fact, there was a Joy of Learning campaign that became jollying around. Education is much more than that.

Coming to what Krishna Kumar ended with, how do we create an atmosphere for that debate and concern right across people with both these elements? I think now is the time to be a little cynical of the state as well. A lot of us have, because of that expanse, got lured into the state and forgotten, for periods of time, our own place in civil society, spending much more time in structuring. We get lured into the state because it has a structure. If we participate in a textbook development process, it goes across the state without us having to actually structure how it does that.

All of us based in civil society space need to reflect on the spaces there are, and how we can network amongst ourselves to be critical of the state – not cynical, but critical – and do much more outside the state efforts to bring a different kind of perspective in society. That is what then the state uses community, because community perceptions of education criticality still remain conservative. This is what the people want, as Krishna Kumar says. They want private schools. So how can we maximize the time and effort we spend on the people?

Divya: I am working with Bodh. This has been a very, very big question for us, because we have been working with community schools for the last 27 years. There has been, collectively, a lot of energy and effort and thought on how we can create schools which are community schools, and also where we are not looking at school in isolation but as learning communities where learning is celebrated. Scientific thought and temperament has been a very important angle in it. But the biggest question has been of the dialectics of science and the community, and whether we can really draw a line between 'science of the community' and 'science to the community'.

In communities, when you make the effort to really question anything, it automatically, naturally, takes a path to the very foundation of the community, where religion is definitely an aspect of beliefs. Then there's gender, that the woman is responsible for all miscarriages, for example. There's also the cultural aspect. So the cause and relationship that the community has already drawn up may not be very objective. How do you question it? Can you really draw a line and say you will go only to this level, not beyond? If you do touch the line, it takes a different shape altogether. Then how do you take it forward?

The question of real scientific temper is a bigger question, not just with the marginalized. Then there is the issue of being seen as anti-religious because ours is a leftist organization. To an extent,where it is related to environment and to issues that don't question the foundational beliefs, it has been fine. But the moment it goes more to the core, it becomes a struggle. I would really like to know KSSP's experience, especially when it is around religion and other foundational issues.

Hardy: I have two separate questions, KK. One is this. For a long time, the People's Science Movement became the science popularization movement. In my mind, there is a big distinction.

And that is also what we talked about –the technical aspects of education and the people's aspect of politics. So how do you see that? And do you think the expansion of the entire effort – jathas across the states – had any impact on the dilution of the nature of the work of PSM itself?

The second is the adult education/literacy question that you raised – the centralization, in a sense, of the control, from people to structures which are created by the government, of which BGVS was a big part in many districts, many states. What do you think has been the effect of that, in the long run, on BGVS itself – the fact that all these committees were headed by the people from this movement, and they left the process?

Krishna Kumar: See, our own understanding of science, people interface and community has evolved quite a lot. But I think, as you rightly pointed out, we still continue to talk about science to people, etc. None of that has changed. We have not fully, internally probably, transformed. Because to understand science with people rather than science to the people is very easily said but actually not very easy.

It is also connected with what you were asking about religion. It is a real, tough question. And many of those positions that we took at one point of time were wrong, I feel. We were very ardently trying to prove that there was no god. I don't think it is going to be a very important question at all. You are not going to get even five people to sit and discuss that kind of question. So you could leave that and start with, probably, community. Whether you like it or not, it is not taking your notion of god or science to people that is important. It is starting with their notion that is very important.

We are doing a few things and, at the same time, finding it a really helpless kind of situation because we are becoming victims of our own arguments. At one point of time we thought people would slowly start coming to us. I don't like that logic at all. But the logic is that we consider 90 per cent of the people to be naïve and ourselves very intelligent. Slowly, we will make them all intelligent, and then we have a proper discussion. Till then, we are always talking down to the people. This has been our notion. We will have to stand on our heads and correct that. It is going to be like this all the time. There will be different kinds of faiths and beliefs, and we will continue to argue to keep the dialogue alive.

We started a campaign very recently against Akshaya Tritiya.

Now for everything there is a day, and Akshaya Tritiya is one of those days. We had never heard about this earlier. And I know neighbours – well educated people, who hold MPhil, PhD and even post-doctoral degrees – who go to the gold shop on Akshaya Tritiya day. In most Kerala shops you have to take a token one month ahead – you won't be able to go there on the actual day. The biggest gold shops in Kerala have one-kilometre length queues. I am not exaggerating. The most literate state has such literate queues!

In such things we thought there was no point in letting them be, saying that is how society was. So we started attacking it, calling Akshaya Tritiya the second April Fool's day – a golden April Fool's day. There are certain things you cannot compromise on, and there are a large number of issues where you have to enter into dialogues. That is the only way.

Kerala's situation is very strange. There are several schools that are not getting renovated but all the temples are – they all have very strong community based societies. You may not have a very good SMC in a nearby school. But strong Save Temple Societies, or whatever it is, are everywhere, and huge amounts of money are spent on celebrations.

We thought a lot about how we should intervene. Should we start attacking them? We would be beaten up. No communication was possible, so did we want to freely get beatings? What we did was, we started dialogues around that. We have strong panchayats nowadays, so we started debating in the panchayat. We asked gram sabhas (village councils) to debate on priority issues. We are not opposing temples. But if something is more important than a temple, why shouldn't that be taken into consideration?

I think the only possible thing so far as we can see is to continue with science based logic, development, etc. on the one hand, and bring more and more debate into society. Don't be so naïve as to directly attack religion. It is not going to work – that is at least our experience. But at the same time, if you start compromising completely, then in a society where the Prime Minister is talking about plastic surgery on Ganesh and so on, you also may end up in the 16th or 15th century.

Whether people like it or not, as science movements, as educational movements, you will have to take some uncompromising positions. We have done that. We have been propagating. Last year, the campaign issue in Kerala was scientific temper. In the present age, how do you deal with science and scientific temper? There were a lot of arguments, but we have been boldly facing them.

Hardy asked two very important questions, one about the Science Movement. I think there are different experiences in the Science Movement. It is not uniform. On the one hand, though initially it became a science popularization movement, in many places, it has expanded the meaning of what you call science – which it has to, because it is not talking about science alone any more, not even as a knowledge system. The manner in which society is functioning and science is playing a role – not technology, science – that is the larger question.

That is why, for example, in Kerala we were now talking more and more not about science, but about development. There are very interesting examples. There are a large number of aided schools in Kerala, which are what you call privately owned government supported schools. Salaries and so on are given by the government, but they are private. An interesting situation emerging is that all the private aided schools want to sell their land. Why? One big lobby in Kerala is the land mafia – the 'flat people'. Wherever there is a piece of land, it becomes a flat. The private management of the schools say they get big money. Why would they want that small one lakh rupee government grant every year as a profit when they can get crores by selling? That is the tussle. In Calicut, one of our important towns, there is the very prestigious old Nadakkavu School. One night, the management completely dismantled the school and the land was taken over. Building work for flats was to begin the next day. But that became a spot for a major community intervention. The entire community decided they would not allow it.

What I am saying is that it is now not a question of education alone. It is not as if there is some corporate interest somewhere in policy making, but education is separate. It is all coming together. So the Science movement cannot any more be a science popularization movement. It will have to deal with burning questions of development, and day-to-day issues. We have kind of started doing that, depending upon the situation.

In some of the northern states we started the literacy movement initially and then slowly entered into the Science Movement. However, we are yet to get into this kind of a mode in the Kerala kind of states, where there is no way to link up with larger social issues. Whether environment, or health, they were separate compartments. Now we cannot do that any more. The larger education policy of the government is part of the corporate neo-liberal kind of attitude. So we have to touch upon that. All

the PSM movements – even those that were a little reluctant to move fast – are now being dragged into the larger framework of the movement. Otherwise we will be completely out of context.

Secondly, two things happened in the literacy movement. One, the government took over and completely bureaucratized it. Along with that, some of our people also got bureaucratized. BGVS was very close to the government. Those at BGVS rode in the Collector's car, entered his office without waiting in queue... all of this went to the heads of some people. I know there are districts that went out of BGVS simply because we argued that a person should not continue as a coordinator for more than two or three terms, that new people should come. Some said, "We will leave BGVS but not the coordinator's post." But on the whole, that was not the story.

There are districts like Dhanbad or Saharsa where we have been in the field of literacy for the past 25 years, but even now we cannot exist on our own. That would be a minimalist kind of existence. We still exist with the government. Things change depending upon policy – whether it is a BJP government or Congress, who the Secretary is... So we are not an independent movement in some of these places.

There are examples where we have been able to develop on our own – saying bye-bye to the government and developing our own programmes, including literacy, within our limitations. There are district units that completely went out and decided to be part of something else, part of government, or on their own. Once you start enjoying that independence, you always want that. So some of them went but the majority stayed. At one point of time we thought that if the NLM (National Literacy Mission) stopped funding, BGVS would not be able to continue. That didn't happen. We were able to continue and are everywhere. Volunteerism, as Usha said, is what generated BGVS and to a large extent, the PSM movement. In 90 per cent of places, this is what is sustaining us in spite of severe constraints.

One of the major problems I would like to place before you is the lack of our own understanding about the time that is required for social processes. We are working at present in six blocks on a back-to-school programme funded by SDTT (Sir Dorabji Tata Trust). This has been running for the last three-four years, and they have given a one-year extension. Now it is about to close. About 7000 children are studying as part of this programme. The idea is basically to give them fundamentals – build a bridge and put them back into school. RTE says if people want a school, there will be a school. But that is

not the reality.

There is another story. In most of the villages, we are trying to put children back in schools. When we do that, the schools say, "Take our children, too, to your centre. Let them sit there. They like going there. Why should they waste their time studying here? We will also come with them." We told them it was against the rules, that we were doing all this so the children could go back to school again. But they said, "Never mind, we'll continue like this." We are prepared to let things continue this way – but we don't have the money.

The project is coming to a conclusion. We have 7000 volunteers, and with great difficulty, without any payment, they have been coming every day for three years. We give them only a little bit of money for their camps and so on. Otherwise they come on the basis of their commitment. But what do we tell them after three or four months, when the project concludes? That SDTT doesn't have the provision to continue, and the government doesn't think about it? However much we want to or try, we will not be able to continue.

This has happened on many occasions. When the RTE started, we put forward the idea that it was good but unless we were able to make it a people's agenda, nothing would happen. So we floated an idea called Panchayat Shiksha Adhikar Samiti – not a statutory body, a people's body. In every panchayat, there are 100-150people who know everything about RTE, and our idea was that from out of them would emerge the SMC which would constantly, continuously interact with the Panchayat Shiksha Adhikar Samiti. It would be organic to the panchayat of that village.

The SMC is a statutory body. The government can play with it. So initially SMCs may go this way or that way but slowly, as these people came forward, the real SMCs will come into existence. This was the plan. The Government of India Elementary Education Division supported us for one-and-a-half years. We worked in something like 20,000-25,000 villages. There was an excellent response. We also developed convergence. We thought that it could not be just about education alone – other things too should be linked. So gender, women's empowerment, all kinds of things were included. But after one-and-a-half years, there was not a paisa for us to go ahead.

We thought that we could continue at least in some places. But how? In a Bihar village, how can you sustain it? In Kerala, we

could manage – making some money out of bookselling, etc. It is difficult. You may be able to sustain up to five per cent, ten per cent. So ultimately what happened? We reached out to something like 23,000 villages. Two-three lakh people from the community were with us but we had no wherewithal to continue. The government said there was no provision for us to go ahead.

With such situations, on several occasions, one after the other, we felt we were cheating people. After a long gap, the Government of India suddenly decided they would reinvent literacy. It was very difficult, but then, when they said they would support it, we took out the Saakshar Bharat Yatra and BGVS was very much involved. We went out to something like 20,000 villages, 30,000 pockets, 300 villages, etc. I was personally not for that because I knew that the government would not follow through with it and we would be cheating the people again. I still remember, I went to interior villages in Bihar, Jharkhand and so on. Our jatha would reach late at night, around 9 o'clock and perform till 11 o'clock. There could be seven power cuts but not one person would go away. There was no unnecessary talking – everybody sat there watching us. So much credibility after so much cheating!

So there are people who are willing – the community is willing. I believe that a large majority of the community is willing to support public education, support literacy. Nobody talks about literacy. Nobody talks about the fact that India is a country with the largest number of literates in the world.

These larger issues will have to be taken back to the community. When you deal with those issues and are with the people, then issues like religion don't matter. We had hundreds of opportunities to have a tussle or discussion over it. In Kerala, when we did the literacy campaign, we went to the Muslim community leaders. Nobody said they were against it. We asked them to support us, and they did. They understood. I will not say that they changed a lot but we were able to fully make use of their good offices or blessings for the campaign.

I am sure we will be able to take such help from community leaders in primary education. We should do that. Use their blessing, educate children. And those children will start talking to them in a slightly different language and idiom – which, of course, they may not like! We have to do it in a roundabout way. Hitting directly is not going to be helpful.

Usha: I want to respond to what you said about talking science for the people, creating a new science for the people. When we start

working, we realize that there are a lot of issues on which no work has been done. And new science or new technological solutions can emerge where that understanding can be incorporated.

Just being in a particular context also means that you understand which issues can be taken up and which cannot. There are no general solutions. The solutions are very, very context specific. We think about science as pure logic – it is not. Human interests are very much a part of the journey through which science is developed. It will have to go back to connect with those interests. You sometimes see transformations taking place in people for which, of course, one has to be there on the spot to try out the waters.

Once, the daughter of a school principal tried to commit suicide because she was maangalik, born under an inauspicious star. This is something that stresses many people. You have to talk to them and explain scientific facts. Then again, what we say is Makara Sankranti, is actually not so. The sun is not in that zodiac sign when the day is being celebrated – because of the precision of the equinoxes, Uttarayan is not on 14th of January. But we don't enter into an argument, we just celebrate it on 21st or 22nd on the exact moment of the winter solstice. All this doesn't change people but slowly they start thinking. The principal's daughter talked about how she was tortured because of being maangalik. When their interests coincide with the framework, it gives them more support. Hence, perhaps frameworks are more important than individual actions and these have to be context specific.

Activity Based Learning Programmes in Various States

M P Vijayakumar, Padma Sarangapani, Anwar Jafri

M.P. VIJAYKUMAR joined the Tamil Nadu state government in 1975 and over four decades served in significant roles in various departments. He has a special interest in elementary education and implemented ABL first in about 260 schools in Chennai during his stint as the Chennai Municipal Corporation Commissioner. He also served as Director of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) in Chennai, and was instrumental in scaling ABL in more than 35,000 schools in Tamil Nadu.

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ANWAR JAFRI is the Director, Samavesh-Society for Development and Governance, an NGO based in Bhopal that works to empower the community, especially vulnerable sections, to create a more equitable and democratic society. Education is one of the key areas of Samavesh's work. In their work in elementary schools in Dewas & Harda districts in MadhyaPradesh, they have used Multi-Grade Multi-Level (MGML) methodology to improve quality of learning. Prior to founding Samawesh in 2006, Anwar has been one of the founding members of Eklavya in the early '80s.

M.P. Vijaykumar: Why ABL? It all started somewhere in 1993, when a group of teachers and some officers were sharing a serious concern about poor learning outcomes of children in schools. Both DPEP (District Primary Education Programme) assessment survey reports and SSA revealed a number of national achievement surveys, by government sponsored agencies like NCERT (National Council of Educational Research) and also independent agencies like ASER (Annual Status of Education Report). All of them were unanimous about one conclusion – that learning outcomes are abysmally poor. In Mathematics and Language, about 40-50 per cent children don't learn much after five years of schooling. This is despite huge public investment in teacher training and a plethora of incentives – giving them enrolment, textbooks and uniforms free of cost, bus passes, footwear...

Learning outcomes are mostly confined to literacy and numeracy. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 spells out a few clear objectives of education. One, our children should be able to think clearly and act independently. Secondly, they must be able to solve problems by applying solutions, and thinking creatively and flexibly. The third important objective is a predisposition to democratic values. We are a democracy. We don't shoot and kill whenever we have a difference of opinion. We work through consensus. That social, interpersonal skill will not come like magic when they are 20-21. It has to start earlier. We don't assess performance in our classrooms along these indicators. What about emotional skills like confidence, self-esteem, pride? We have been looking at only literacy and numeracy, and failing miserably even in that.

Who is responsible? There are 186 million children in our country. Annually, we spend about 1,36,000 crore rupees for 6.3 million teachers in 1.3 million schools. Look at the magnitude

of investment! What is the nature of the problem? Is it financial, a dearth of resources? Not so. Look at the figures. All these 1.3 million schools are up and running. The 6.3 million teachers regularly attend school and teach children. Maybe there is a ten per cent variation either way. But why are we not producing results?

Dr Ananthalakshmi, our mentor, used to prod us saying that if engineers and doctors go away from our country, we make an issue of brain drain. But every day the brains of 50 per cent of 186 million children are getting wasted. When news items are published about these achievement survey results there is so much of noise for a couple of days, and then it fades away.

Who is responsible? Are parents responsible? No, because our enrolment ratio has been more than 100 per cent, which indicates that parents are leaving their children in school. Can we blame teachers? Can we say all 6.3 million teachers in our country are bad teachers? Blaming their community as a whole is very unfair.

What about students? Are they responsible for this impasse? They learn many things outside the classroom. At the age of one-and-a-half, children start learning to speak, and by the age of five-six speak fluently in the mother tongue. They pick up the use of electronic gadgets – cell phone, TV remote – very fast. Therefore it is unfair to blame children. The capacity of a child to learn is natural and universal.

As managers, are we responsible? We just looked at the system. How do children learn? Suppose, in this group, 50 per cent of us do not know swimming. If I try to teach you how to swim for the next two-three hours, giving a demo and showing a DVD, and put you in a pool after two hours, will you be able to swim? You won't. If you want to learn swimming, you need to swim. If you want to learn cycling, you need to cycle. This is what theory says. Now, you tell me about one school where they provide opportunities for children to learn by doing.

This is one important malady. The second important issue for the system is multi-grade schools. India is a poor country. We can't afford teachers for mono-grade. It has to be multi-grade. Seventy-five per cent of our schools are two-teacher schools with just 50-60 children. One teacher has to handle three grades and 13 textbooks in a year. It is humanly not possible. There is no remedial. If children miss certain lessons, there is no way they can catch up later. Our exam systems are cruel and punitive. Very often we know very well that the children have not learnt what they should. But even then we administer tests, only to demonstrate that they have not learnt

and to brand them as dull. In a nutshell, our system is designed to fail. This is how we have been carrying on.

We – the group of teachers and bureaucrats – felt this was like a paradox principle, an important reason that contributed to the 80 per cent failure. What could we do about this? We came across an extraordinarily good pedagogy being practised by Rishi Valley School for more than a decade, developed by Padmanabha Rao and Rama Rao. The multi-grade, which is debatable, always considered a problem in the system, is converted by this pedagogy into a strength. It provides the opportunity for every child to learn every skill. We wanted to adopt this and tried it in 13 schools in the Chennai Corporation in 2003. Within one year, it was scaled up to 265 schools, from Grades 1-4, and within four years to 37,486 schools in Tamil Nadu.

Video titled ***The Silent Revolution: An Initiative of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Chennai District, Tamil Nadu*** *shows a Corporation School in Chennai where children are quietly involved with some learning material and teaching themselves to read, write or count. A voiceover tells us they come willingly to school. The teacher is not armed with a cane, she doesn't dominate – she sits on a mat with the children around her. There is order without the bullying voice of authority.*

The story behind this silent revolution seems to be Activity Based Learning, the method of education followed in the Corporation Schools of Chennai since 2003, when MP Vijaykumar became Commissioner. In the ABL kit in Tamil Nadu, the subjects covered are 5+1 (Tamil, English, Mathematics, Science, Social Science + Puppetry and Storytelling]. Tamil and English lessons begin with illustrated cards and short words that are easy to write, rather than the alphabet sequence. Mathematics is learnt through attractive multifarious materials. Science and Social Science cards are largely based on the textbook, with a variety of activities attached to every chapter. For Puppetry and Storytelling there are storybooks, papercraft, drawing, collage, and outdoor group games.

By bringing the blackboard from the teacher's eye level to the child's, and by increasing the blackboard space, two more learning aids have been created –a specific space for each child to write, and a large space to read each other's exercises. Every child owns a part of that blackboard.

When the child completes one set of activities, there is a card for self-evaluation. The achievement chart clearly shows the

positions of the children in each area. Thus the teacher is able to track every learner's progress.

Monitoring of progress by the teacher is combined with the child's freedom to select the pace of learning. In building in the opportunity of recall of learnt material at each stage, evaluation is part of the process. There is no failure and, therefore, no fear of failure. In the conventional school system, so many children drop out of school because they fail. The need for an examination at the end of the school year is made redundant, and there are no ranks that indicate the value of a child – that one is better or worse than another. The teacher keeps an eye on the levels attained by every child and sometimes pairs an advanced learner with a slower one for peer teaching.

Ranking and peer competition are further reduced by mixing age groups and classes. In a room of 40 children, there could be ten each from Classes 1, 2, 3 and 4. This vertical grouping has several advantages. It recreates a family model where the older child automatically becomes a guide and helper for the younger one. It encourages cooperation rather than competition. We are told that a multi-grade classroom is a problem which many rural schools confront. ABL is a simple solution to that complicated issue. The system absorbs different age groups and different ability levels within the same age group.

Taking daily attendance is a ritual in most schools. The ABL method makes the process child-friendly. At morning assembly, one student from each class level in the room distributes each child's attendance cards and collects the filled-up ones. This puts the responsibility for marking attendance on the child and not the teacher, and children enjoy the sense of trust that this implies.

One of the constant problems of schooling is absenteeism. If a child is sick for a week, he cannot follow the lesson when he gets back. ABL makes the mastering of a skill not a collective but an individual exercise. A child goes to the points on the ladder where s/he left off and continues from there.

Repetition of a lesson acts as reinforcement. That is accepted pedagogy. But instead of the sing-song chanting of tables, in ABL a child writes on the blackboard first, his notebook next and finally in the workbook. Since he writes the same material three times, the pattern gets well established whatever the lesson.

Gender equality is achieved rather effortlessly. Girls and boys sit at low desks or on reed mats together and share their work without any awkwardness.

There is another DVD with pedagogy for Secondary education,

called Active Learning Methodology. We implemented the kind of classroom you saw, in 37,486 schools in six months' time. Somewhere in January or February 2007, the government announced that this had to be implemented in all schools. Within six months we printed nearly 4000 cards of different dimensions – 40,000 sets – and distributed them to nearly 13,000 schools, and trained 2,00,000 teachers. All supervisors and educators were trained. By 2007 June, the entire state of Tamil Nadu was using this pedagogy.

Administrative orders – like changing a class period to half a day, instructing our supervisors not to look at loads of lessons but at how children learn, at achievement charts etc. – along with a number of systemic orders were issued. Training would be in classrooms – 70-80 per cent demo, working with teachers, and 20 per cent theory. Sometimes it was hands-on training.

The biggest factor for success was that the scheme was evolved and improvised on by practising teachers, who also did the training and monitoring. It was an important step towards acceptance by other teachers. Supervisors were trained in the same way, and told not to blame anybody, that we should trust our teachers and children. In case some students didn't do well, they should find out the reason.

There were 6000 teacher educators and they were all trained. Each one was assigned five to six schools. They did rounds of the schools, sat with the teachers, and solved their problems. We never asked for out-of-base indicators, because what we had contemplated was a paradigm shift of a process that had been there for hundreds of years. So we told them to only look at the process and not worry about the outcome. If we looked at outcomes, we knew that the teachers would start fudging. Process based indicators were developed, and we subsequently introduced scaffolding outside those indicators. But for two years we never looked at outcomes.

What were the challenges? I can't think of any. Whenever you want a big change in the system, administrative and political will have to match. In this case, the government was more interested than any of us in implementing the scheme. Teachers' motivation was the highest. I visited more than 5000 schools and interacted with around 50,000 teachers. They were extraordinary. If somebody starts blaming teachers, I am prepared to challenge them. I have interacted with them. If at all teachers have not performed well so far, it is because we have not empowered

them well. There are so many constraints. When we offered them a pedagogy with which they could produce results, we saw them committed to the process – sitting on the floor without a semblance of protest.

So too with community support. Of course, it took a few months. At first, there was resistance: "Why are you making my 4th Standard boy sit in the 1st Standard?" The teacher said, "Wait for three months, and then if you are not convinced, we will change." After three months, the same parents were asked to sit in the classroom and observe. They were convinced, and there was no going back.

Whenever we start a new scheme, there is the question of sustainability. This was started in 2007-8. Seven years down the line, two governments have changed. I don't know about others, but in Tamil Nadu, each successive government sees to it that the previous government's scheme is spoilt. But although governments and secretaries have changed, those who formulated and implemented this scheme have all retired, the scheme is continuing.

When we contemplated the scheme, our intention was to change the pedagogy to being child-centric. ABL is only a name. Even though that pedagogy was very well enunciated and explained in our teacher training programmes, none of them practiced what they had learnt. They said they had studied teaching-learning theory only as an objective to get through exams, and once they passed the exams, they just forgot about it. When we brought it to them again, they grabbed it.

Was ABL successful or not? I can tell you with 100 per cent confidence that Tamil Nadu can never go back to a 100 per cent textbook oriented culture. That change we have brought in. It may not be to the extent we desired but it has come to stay. There has to be a self-examination system now.

With reference to objectives, it has by and large succeeded. When it came to scaling it up, it was not just about printing and distribution of materials. It involved a lot of ethos. The project managers of SSA interacted with all 2,00,000 teachers. We saw a model school. With the same teachers and the same children, the results have been overwhelming. It is because of the method, the process, the pedagogy. So if somebody blames you for poor learning outcomes, tell them it is not so. If we can bring about a change in learning outcomes by changing the pedagogy, then we must safely conclude that the pedagogy was responsible earlier too. When we contemplated this scheme, when we wanted to improve the quality of education, we thought that to change something we should first

know what went wrong – you can't shoot in the dark. I was very clear that it was to do with pedagogy.

An important highlight is that we made NCERT and all State Resource Centres irrelevant. The entire process of implementing – bringing in a paradigm shift – was done without the involvement of NCERT and SCERT, all those agencies that now evaluate the ABL. For hundreds of years, we were following a conservative system and the learning outcome was poor. Why was it not evaluated? We took not even a rupee from outside – 100 per cent funding for the project was approved. What the government provides monetarily is actually more than enough.

Finally, if the government system is not functioning well, the solution does not lie in lubricating it. The solution lies in finding out the fault and setting it right. We have always demonstrated that things can change in government.

Thank you.

Anwar Jafri: Mr Vijaykumar gave us a good example of how we learn from a success. I am going to give you two stories where we learnt from failure. One is a very small, micro level experiment that we have done in Madhya Pradesh (MP) working with 50 government schools. The other is a more macro experiment that the MP government started in 16,000 schools.

I worked in Eklavya and then later on in Samavesh, and we always tried to see how we could make schools more effective. We did a lot of experiments in Eklavya, working with teachers and programmes in schools. The government too was involved in some of these. But the schools as a system did not give us very happy results. We wondered what was being left out, whether community involvement was an important factor that was missing. Although there were other inputs, the people at the local level were not really involved in governing, supervising and looking after the schools. We wondered how to bring all of it together.

When we started off, things like Village Education Committees had just come in. The idea was to have more involvement of the people in schools. We tried to talk about this to them, and set up around 10-15 examples of such villages. We also spoke to panchayats in those areas to see how local government could help improve the quality of schools. It didn't seem to work. We talked to all the Village Education Committee members but they weren't interested. Finally, we thought it was because of a lack of

direct experience.

So we tried to help people set up their own centres in villages, where they would have a say. After a lot of convincing, some of these centres started. We supported them – partly or fully – with money, provided the space, and were supposed to help with the quality of teaching, bringing in the pedagogy and things like that.

These were non-formal sectors. Young people were selected to run these centres. But again, beyond a point, our pedagogy was not very effective. I used to visit Rishi Valley School, because our daughter was studying there. This was around the year 2000. I was very impressed by the programme being run in that school – it looked like a very effective system. And we thought, let's try it.

So we bought these bags called the School-in-a-Box package, sent our people for training, and got started in six centres in rural Madhya Pradesh. It took time and was troublesome. But there were three or four boys and one girl who were really interested in it. After about six or eight months, things started changing and these centres became very popular. The point to be noted is that the centres were running in a totally non-formal fashion and had, in a sense, all the requirements of a self-paced learning experiment – which is what ABL is.

After about one year, some of these centres really took off. One special pre-school centre was running on a platform next to a temple, and it was so popular that more children wanted to come in. So another group was started for the evening. They ran pretty well. Of course, the learning was not age-appropriate because these children were between Class 2 and 5 and were completing what in ABL is the Class 1-2 package. But the interesting thing in our areas is that if you complete a Class 2-level course very well in Class 5, you do pretty well! Some were very happy with their results right up to high school and later.

The other interesting thing was that three of our teachers who worked with the system were very unhappy with it. They said it didn't allow them to teach the way they ought to. Two of them actually left last year.

I would like to point out that the 'ABL package' is actually quite a misnomer. We bring in activities in whichever ways we can. Our idea is that Activity Based Teaching is a sort of constructivist teaching which allows children to do things on their own, but also has a number of other inputs. When teachers and young people first heard about it they were a bit sceptical and almost scared because ABL expresses the whole curriculum of a class in a pictorial way

on the wall. The curriculum is then broken up symbolically into milestones, each of which is further subdivided into activities.

The interesting thing is that we expect the teacher to fully comprehend this, and follow it on an everyday basis. So even children know where they are, what the next activity will be, and if they have not been able to do something, how to repeat it. This was a big challenge when we wanted to take it up on a larger scale because it is not easy for teachers and children to understand. We had taken up 50 schools by then, and wanted to start a programme where we combined the inputs of the school, the teachers, the education system – the Block Resource Centre – and voluntary groups, and see how the community could come in to participate and support this. We started with some card based activity packages we had been developing in Eklavya. Initially, the teachers were very suspicious. Although we had an MoU with the government, they didn't want to let us in. They were wondering if we would report them about something. We tried to find a strategy to enter the school, and finally told them to allow us to teach their weakest children between Class 1 to 5, and see what happened. They agreed.

After that we were welcome in almost all the 50 schools. The children enjoyed this different way of learning, and started doing better. The teachers would keep coming into the class to see which children had started reading. If a Class 4 child was doing a bit better, the teacher would grab him and take him back to her class. So we made a place for ourselves in the system.

Since all those working with us in the schools were local boys and girls, they knew the village and got the school committees going. These became more active and put pressure on the teachers. If the teachers were active and motivated, they helped with regard to centres for the community and the team, and taught more actively. If they were not, the community took stronger control and made sure that the teachers came in.

So on these two fronts, teachers and the community, we seemed to be doing all right. But after a year or so when we asked our teachers – boys and girls from the village – how they were doing in class, we were told that they weren't really doing very well and weren't happy. The problem was that, as in a normal class, the teachers were able to take along about 30-40 per cent of the children with them. But the others were still being left behind, either dropping out, or not coming, or sitting silently and surveying, not participating in the activities.

We went back to wondering how we could involve those children, because this was a continuous problem, even in our earlier work with a textbook approach. Finally, our teachers who had been participating in the early MGML programme convinced us that we should try out that method.

In MP, at that time not many people knew about MGML and we were worried about bringing it in. But one of the teachers was very convincing. So we tried to introduce MGML in all these 50 schools. Initially, it was a bit of a challenge, because the training was difficult. We had to develop a slightly modified form for the 25 teachers who were to get trained in the MGML or the ABL approach.

At the first training we attended in Rishi Valley we had seen them introducing this whole new concept of weather. Our teachers were aware of activities, and had been doing many of them in class. But they could not link it to the curriculum, and how children had to take individual responsibility and relate to their positions on the ladder. So we got them to think about the activities they had been doing themselves and to apply logic to them – which ones had to precede others, which needed more time or less time, how to decide when children were ready for an activity. They all tried to think out some way of doing it on their own. Once they got that, it was much easier for them to understand the MGML package.

ABL is now practised in about 13-14 states, facing problems in different places. There has to be contextualization. We have to see where teachers stand, what type of material they have been using, what activities they have already been doing, and what local contexts can be brought in with regard to textbooks and materials.

Soon there was a big demand from other schools too. So we brought in activity based material in all the 50 schools. Our strategy at that point was for our own teachers to start using it in the government schools, so that other teachers saw it and got convinced. Our MoU with the government allowed entry into the school to try out something – we couldn't insist that all the teachers followed our methods. The good thing is that the state governments do let you into the school, and if it is in the rural areas they don't really bother about what you are doing as long as you don't create a problem.

So the government teachers would stop by and sit down to watch what was happening. Any innovation requires a big amount of change, and the real change here was in the relationship between the different people involved, as between teacher and student. The teacher has a position of power, and I think where most of these

programmes have not succeeded, it is because teachers cannot accept a very different place in the classroom – to sit down and observe. So teachers started sitting down, and about 10-12 of them began to use the material. Slowly, others too wanted us to get them the material to try out. For us, it was a different paradigm of training. We had to go beyond just training and bring in more changes to ensure results. Then there were other things like support and follow-up and so on.

Let me come to the tragic end of the first part of the story. Our 50 schools became really popular. We were working with the jan shikshaks (people educators), and they would talk about the schools in the general block level meetings and other jan shikshaks and teachers wanted to try it as well. Now, our project, and our MoU, was only for 50 schools. But we became ambitious – and ambition, you know, is not a good thing. We decided to extend the programme to another 100 schools over the next two-three months. And we were totally unprepared for it. We didn't have enough material, or a team. Only 15 people were working with us in each of these schools. So each of them was given another three schools to work in, apart from the one where they were working full-time. After six months, when we reviewed it, we found it was quite a disaster. The worst thing that happened was that the programme had collapsed in the original 50 schools as well, because the other teachers had not taken it up and there was no formal system for it.

If civil society organizations do a small experiment, then the failure is also relatively small. But it did teach us a lot. We had tried to get into touch with the government of MP because they were introducing the ABL programme on a large scale. But somehow things didn't work out. Most of the people involved were not very keen, especially at the second level. The Secretary would always welcome us into the system, but the people who were actually implementing it – many of whom didn't really have a very good academic idea of it – kept us out. So we had a very distant view of the whole thing and didn't get very involved. Luckily, the programme is still on, and the government is still considering how to involve us more.

Now I would like to tell you the other part of the story, the state-level story. It started in 2008, and in 2009 the programme was introduced in 4000 schools, almost all at one go – about 80 schools in every district of Madhya Pradesh – with material based on work done in Chhattisgarh and elsewhere. The programme

was tested in 2009 for about 15 days to a month, then introduced it in the whole area. I don't know how they reviewed it, but sometimes the government maxim seems to be 'when in trouble, expand'. So they went on to about 16,000 schools. They took one block from every district and covered it fully, and 40 schools in another block. This was in 2011. By 2013 they wanted to cover 50 per cent of schools in MP, which was about 43,000 schools, and all the 80,000 schools by 2014-5. Fortunately, they decided not to expand due to some problems, and today it still stands at 16,000 schools.

The story is very different in different places. In Tamil Nadu, it was tried out in 13 schools to begin with. In Chhattisgarh, they started with some 20 schools and stayed with those for a couple of years before covering one block and expanding later on. One big learning in this case was, how do we keep our idea of expanding fast in control, and match our learning and ability to extend with what is available. Of course, in MP, the other thing was that the teachers who went on to try it, and also those who were supporting them, did not really have hands-on experience or training. They had seen something happening somewhere else, got excited and went into it.

These are some of the issues and questions that will come up when we talk about scaling up. This was our experience, both at the small level and at the higher level. Thank you.

Padma Sarangapani: I am going to speak about the ABL programme primarily drawing from a study that I have done. I must confess I haven't visited Rishi Valley – seen the programme in action there – nor have I visited schools in Tamil Nadu or even HD Kote, where I think the programme earned its first accolades for being capable of addressing learning needs of government schooling systems.

I conducted this study– along with my colleague Archana Mehendale and the support of three researchers, Dalina, Vithola and Alex – to answer a question that the SCERT (State Council of Educational Research and Training) of Chhattisgarh asked us to address, so they could decide what to do with MGML. They had already invested in MGML for four years, and there was clear evidence of immense strain within the SCERT and the government on whether to continue with this or revoke it in preference to new textbook methods being developed. It was already mired in political controversy in the state. I accepted, along with the caveat that I was a sceptic of MGML.

Many of us, I think, are deeply sceptical about the ability of a programme such as the MGML to address a lot of the fundamental

learning requirements of primary school classrooms. It represents ideas of pedagogy and practice that at one level seem to be intensely and immensely child-centred, but on the other hand also go against many of our fundamental presuppositions about how classrooms should be organized, how teachers should be empowered to conduct classes, and how the material world of the classroom needs to be organized.

Another reason why we are deeply sceptical of the MGML classroom – and when I say 'we', I mean me and people like myself – is that we are also quite taken aback by the extraordinary enthusiasm with which bureaucracy especially has embraced this programme and enabled it to expand. It really puzzles us. We have had many very successful small initiatives of high quality intervention into government schooling systems, but bureaucracy has never come on board to pick it up and run with it. On the other hand, where ABL and MGML are concerned, this amazing spread that we see throughout the country is really because of bureaucratic action. So there is something that clicks there which doesn't click for a lot of other kinds of efforts.

Similarly, we are sceptical because if bureaucracy loves it so much, then there must be something more happening over there. Especially when a successful leader like Mr Vijaykumar presents MGML, it seems to solve every problem that a primary school classroom or teacher confronts, and we know from some intuition of having worked in this field that this is not possible. Actually, it is not a simple solution to a complex problem. MGML, the form it takes, and the way it goes about doing things, sometimes seems to be a complex solution to a simple problem. On the other hand, it also seems to empower those who are responsible for quality in the public schooling systems to feel confident that something can be done about it.

It was within this very complex set of considerations that I agreed to do the MGML evaluation study, very conscious that this was going to be an opportunity for me to deal with some of the devils in my own mind and truly ask myself: Is MGML a meaningful programme to bring into the public schooling system? What works in it? And if it works, why does it work?

I want to spend a little bit of time on the design of the study, because it was important for us – especially because I am a sceptic, and we mustn't reach our conclusions very easily. If we want to be critical, then we must have very good grounds to support our criticism. Similarly, if we are enthusiastic, let us have very good

grounds for it, so that it is not just eulogizing a programme.

We spent a lot of effort trying to understand the kinds of claims that were being attributed to the programme by the government of Chhattisgarh, the reasons why they had taken up this programme, the basis on which they were getting their teachers to come on board saying that it was a very good solution to a lot of the pedagogic problems they had been confronting. So we tried to go through a lot of their literature and material to cull out the assumptions the programme seemed to be making.

We addressed several questions. First was the nature and extent of implementation. All of us know that MGML has worked when it has been in small pockets. But it has also expanded very quickly. This was an important question. It is heavily dependent on materials and on a lot of work with teachers. So if the programme was being implemented and expanded, then to what extent was this expansion actually true to the tenets of that programme design? This was quite a straightforward question to answer.

After this, we wanted to engage ourselves with the conceptual soundness of this entire approach and to examine the method, the material and the trainings, to decide for ourselves whether we were convinced that it was pedagogically and conceptually sound. We were also concerned about the quality of the implementation of the programme, because when programmes are scaled, the question of how this is done – how it is imagined and actually cascaded from small to large scale – is very important.

With MGML so heavily dependent on materials and artefacts, we wanted to understand was that happening even at the very simple level of these reaching where they should. Leave alone the deeper questions about the quality of the training that teachers undergo and so on, or even the kind of field support available to teachers once the programme has expanded.

We were concerned about pedagogy, quality and the concerns of teachers. A lot of my own scepticism about MGML is centrally around the way in which it conceptualizes the teacher and the teacher's work. We were also concerned about how a programme of this kind which follows the kind of methodology that Mr Vijaykumar has delineated –self-paced learning dependent on material, with ladders and children following this – is able to address questions of irregularity and remediation, which are key concerns.

How is it also able to address many of the contextual issues that Chhattisgarh state, for example, deals with? For instance, the fact that this programme has to work in tribal areas, and requires

multilingualism. The programme is in fact in Hindi and the lingua franca of Chhattisgarh is Chhattisgarhi. And if you just step into Bemetara or any of these districts, you find tribal dialect. So to what extent is the programme recognizing and factoring in multilingualism and dialect, the difference between home language and school language? How is this programme actually conceptualizing and addressing the needs of emergent literacy? It should be very squarely taking on the fact that the learners in government schools are likely to be first generation school goers, so the extent of home support for early literacy is going to be next to nothing.

So we were interested in assessing the conceptual quality of pedagogy fixed around some of these issues, especially the issue of regularity and irregularity because this is a major claim of MGML. It was also reported in the short film that you saw, that even if children are irregular and miss a week of school it doesn't really matter because they can come back and join the programme where they left off. Irregularity being one of the important concerns of a lot of schools, we wanted to examine this question a little more closely.

We wanted to ask ourselves this hard question – what learning has accrued to children who have gone through this programme, and to what extent can we attribute learning gains to this programme and not to other kinds of considerations? We designed our study to be able to examine this question. So it was quite ambitious and detailed, with several tools and instruments and considerable field engagement as well.

I will spend a little time discussing some of the concerns we had around material before I go on to discussing some of our key findings, and reflections based on that. Interestingly, Chhattisgarh had invested a lot of effort and time and money on revising its textbooks. Also, there was another group – within the same SCERT – working on MGML, and it was clear that the two groups had not talked to each other at all. In fact, there was no process requiring one group to engage with another. So, two major curriculum efforts were going on within the same institution, quite opaque to each other.

The MGML materials, in fact, did not reflect any of the kinds of thinking that were there in the textbooks. Examining the material of the textbooks, we actually found that they were very sound. When you evaluate textbooks, you need some normative framework with which to approach them. We used the NCF

(National Curriculum Framework) 2005, on which there is a lot of consensus. And we found that, in fact, the MGML materials were not in consonance with NCF views in Mathematics or Language. Methods being employed for literacy were not in consonance with a lot of understanding we have today on emergent literacy. Even in an area like Environment Studies, a lot of focus was on factual learning and not on Activity Based Learning.

Now these, we can say, are errors that are amenable to correction – if you find that the materials are not good, you can always revise and replace them. But going through the materials we felt that this entire method was not able to adequately address the question of literacy emergence, and was itself heavily dependent on children's independent reading. So the material really requires the children to be able to manage reading and understanding on their own, even when working in groups or with the assistance of teachers.

However, the methodology for the acquisition of literacy is not very conceptually sound. I am willing to say, with some degree of confidence, that this – not only for the multilingual situation from which children come, but the overall understanding of children's acquisition of literacy – is something which, by and large, at least the Chhattisgarh case did not seem to reflect.

But on the whole, the materials concerned are very closely aligned to Bloom's Mastery Learning paradigm. It's startling – when you read Bloom's classic essay on mastery learning, you find almost the same idea echoed in the handbooks on MGML. When Bloom conceptualized Mastery Learning way back in the 1960s, it was with the conviction that we can identify what is mastery, or what we will designate as mastery of achievement of a concept in every subject area, and every child – at least 90 per cent of all children – should be able to achieve mastery.

According to Bloom, the only thing that deters the ability of a child to achieve mastery is the pace at which the child is taught. So Bloom says that it is not that the children are differentially intelligent, or differentially capable of acquiring basic concepts which we all expect, but they may take more time or less time. So if you just give more time to children who need it, they will also achieve mastery. In other words, pacing is central to the conception of mastery. If you allow the child to control pacing, then every child should be able to achieve what you designate as mastery.

This seems to be a very reasonable premise on which to construct the curriculum. After all, a compulsory schooling

curriculum expects that all children will learn some compulsory content. If children are not able to do it, then they just need more time. And Bloom, in his Mastery Learning paradigm, enables children to control the pace of learning. The learning is structured to be heavily individualized. Many of the adaptive learning programmes today basically follow this paradigm. But Bloom himself, when he wrote that essay, felt that Mastery Learning was probably appropriate for certain subjects which are convergent in character, not those that are more basic and skill oriented. In other words, he felt that you can conceptualize Mastery Learning, for example, in higher order Mathematics or Science. But it is not a pedagogy that is very good for primary school children or emergent literacy.

Can something that is conceptualized for a Mastery Learning paradigm attend to the kind of learning we want in the first two years of a child's schooling? Elements of it can, very usefully, contribute to consolidating learning in certain aspects in Grades 3 and 4. But if I had to use that paradigm to organize learning in Grades 1 and 2, I think I would be challenged. I am not as convinced that Mastery Learning as a methodology is suitable for children who are engaged with learning basic numeracy and literacy. This is one of the problems that I feel the methodology does not adequately acknowledge.

Also, the manner in which the MGML material is conceptualizing the multi-gradedness is, I think, limiting its possibilities. It leans heavily on the axis of individualizing learning. You are able to have children of various levels together, but they are all following their own track. And maybe they are assisting each other like surrogate teachers, but not actually learning the same thing at two different levels.

On the other hand, I can imagine that even if there are a range of levels in the classroom, you can tell the same story. All these children at different levels will understand the same story, but they can do different kinds of activities after that. In other words, we can have activities which are not individualized, but still capable of addressing the multi-graded capability range that you find within classrooms.

I think the MGML methodology doesn't adequately take on board these kinds of possibilities. In fact, there are whole-class activities conceptualized, but which are actually quite limited. Within the whole scheme of things, it is not even very clear how it happens. A child may receive a card, saying, "Do a play." But if

no other child has that card, how is that play going to get done? And when is it going to get done? These are real problems if you start heavily depending on individualized learning ladders, and these contradictions show up in the classroom.

What teachers really do is adapt the methodology to suit what makes the classroom work more effectively. We felt our study had to take that on board and recognize it more actively. We also felt that the conception of the teacher on the whole was not adequate in MGML. I think it is really important – the point being made about the need to recognize and get out of this blame-game syndrome in the approach to teachers. There should be a positive way of thinking about them because they are trained professionals. Especially in government schools, you encounter very experienced trained professionals, and you really don't have any business bossing them around because you happen to be hierarchically placed above them. Also, when they are frustrated, it is an accumulated professional frustration with the situation in which they are compelled to work. It is not a situation of their own making. There is no point in a system that gets into the blame-game approach.

Having said that, I think it is still necessary for the MGML-ABL method to think more deeply on how it wants the teachers' engagement with the learning of children. This question becomes especially charged in Grade 1-2, versus even Grade 3-4. The nature of the whole-class activity with which the teacher needs to engage the group is something the method can recognize and take on board. In fact, we found that in many schools the teachers had actually adapted the method and were doing just that. It didn't matter that MGML required every child to work with their own grade. All the children actually had the same card. The teacher felt the need to work with this group of children who have never been to pre-school before, socialize them into the culture of school by working with that whole group. She was not comfortable setting children off on their own. In fact, the extent to which children kept running up to the teacher, demanding attention all the time, made that entire classroom process quite impossible for the teacher to conduct.

So these are some of the conceptual issues that the method does need to engage with more. If it did, I think many of us from the education side would be more convinced that there is more to it than the material. We want an articulation of 'What is the teacher if she is not a facilitator?' coming out much more robustly in the conceptualization of the programme. I also feel that it is the eye of the teacher that is important in the process of learning – to recognize

that the achievement of learning is something that the child also needs to experience, and recognition from the teacher of having achieved something. That must be built into the method.

One of the really powerful things about the method is the fact that it does give pacing to the child. And it does allow the child to run the class. It is a very remarkable and important insight, which I think those of us who are used to working with textbooks don't know how to understand and appreciate adequately. It is impressive to see how children confidently engage with learning and feel confident about where they are – that they can tell the teacher, "This is where I am." It is the opening up of this aspect of the agency of the child, and of pacing, which are very, very important achievements of the programme.

Nevertheless, I feel that there are some conceptual problems that raise pedagogic questions about the programme. I want to come to a few issues about how we looked at the pedagogy. As I have already been indicating to you, while it may be claimed and may seem that this has solutions to all the pedagogic problems teachers face, and that it is a very complete pedagogy, it isn't. If you go into the classroom, you will find that teachers are actually adapting the material to different kinds of pedagogic needs.

For example, if a teacher really wants to remediate in the classroom, MGML will not enable that. It is not simply a matter of doing more of the same thing. You probably have to engage with the individual child's need in a different way. Right now, at least the MGML version operating in Chhattisgarh does not have that range of different types of approaches to remediation, which a teacher needs. A teacher who really wanted to get into some of these issues would have to innovate and adapt.

Also, we find that a simple comparison of MGML versus textbook is seriously problematic because it is not as if the teachers who aren't doing MGML are doing textbooks. They do something else. They are not even following the textbook, but what I call conventional teaching. For example, Barakhadi is conventional teaching. It is not there in the new textbook, but the teacher will still use Barakhadi, because that's how she thinks it should be done.

So we felt that the comparisons of MGML should not be with a textbook. It is really MGML versus conventional teaching, textbook versus conventional teaching, MGML versus negligent teaching, and textbook versus negligent teaching. We have to recognize that all these things are in operation.

Even within conventional pedagogies, there are teachers who seriously engage with it and produce results, good learning. So rather than just dismissing conventional pedagogy as something to be erased and replaced with what is more child-centred, we have to recognize that given the fact that our teacher education is so shallow, teachers have innovated and drawn on other resources to come up with their own pedagogic practices. And we have to respect and recognize that it can work and produce results.

So the entire process of observing the classroom, we felt, has to take on board all these aspects, rather than simply classify or observe pedagogy as MGML or textbook. It is more complex, especially if you want to attribute effects – you must be able to distinguish between pedagogies.

This question of teacher effort is very central when we understand the pedagogy. Whether or not a teacher respects a child's willingness to learn, uses conventional pedagogy or not, she may be producing results. We have to recognize that teachers either put in effort and have positive views about children, or they have very negative views regarding the educability of children. So if you are trying to factor in this pedagogy, it is not only the technique or methodology or material, but also the attitude the teacher brings into the classroom and her own understanding of what we need to do to bring on board in characterizing pedagogy.

In our study, we tried to do that – to factor in the kinds of teachers' pedagogies. We also tried to factor in the kinds of home backgrounds of children. It is, of course, very complex, and we did not ask them questions about home, literacy and so on – especially because we were testing children in Grade 2 and 3, it would have been completely unreasonable. But we took the literacy level of the village as a proxy marker of the kind of literacy that the child may be having access to, just to try to eliminate other possible explanations for the learning that we saw. The study was designed to enable us to make some of these distinctions and ask ourselves: Is there an MGML effect? Can we say that MGML has produced some change?

To push this question of effect a little further, it is one thing to assess individual children and start attributing effects based on the aggregation of that, but can we look at the effect on a school? Can we say that something is happening in certain schools, and nothing in others? For example, I felt that if at least 50 per cent of the children in a school are performing above a certain level, then something is working there. And if not even 20-30 per cent of the children are achieving something, then something is not working there. We

should be able to look at the school – or the classroom as a space that produces learning – rather than only characterizing the learning of individual children. So if we are looking at efficacy, we will have to arrive at indicators that enable us to develop a slightly more elaborate commentary on the pedagogy, or how we should attribute effects.

I am going to highlight some of our key findings. In Grade 2, there seemed to be an MGML effect. Since the programme had been implemented everywhere, there is no non-MGML school to compare it with, so we created sub-groups – that is, schools where MGML is being used in its full intended way versus schools following conventional pedagogies in a rigorous way, and leaving negligent schools aside but at least recognizing that they were schools with negligent pedagogies. The teachers in those schools were hardly in the classrooms, and children did something on their own.

So we made comparisons between at least these three types of schools to try to look for the effects of MGML. We felt that in Grade 2 there were effects in both Reading and Mathematics. But in Grade 3, we did not find any similar effects. We also found that in schools where the overall attendance of children was regular, then there seemed to be an MGML effect. But if the attendance was irregular, there was not as much evidence of it. So clearly, it seems to work in schools where children are regular, not solve the problem of irregularity to produce high levels of results. We also found that there were higher levels of achievement in schools that were located in villages with higher levels of literacy – not very sure if it is working in the schools where the village literacy levels are lower.

On the whole, in schools following MGML a larger proportion of teachers definitely had more positive views about children and their educability. This was not equally the case in schools with conventional pedagogies. However, we did not find any strong association between positive attitudes of teachers and outcomes. It was complete theory. Even in schools with very negligent teachers, there were reasonably good outcomes. So it is really a complex issue, linked to other things as well.

I should also mention that, on the whole, we found higher achievement in schools where teachers were using MGML but had adapted it. What I have gained from it is that we cannot discount the way in which thinking teachers take a methodology, work on it, adapt it and make it serve the purpose, rather than

just following it like a technique. The investment of the teacher in that adaptation seems to have been quite useful. And it was clearly achieving the purpose she had established for it.

We did actually find that MGML can be used badly as well. So it is not as if MGML on its own produces active children in the classroom. You can go into an MGML classroom and see children doing exactly what you would see them doing in a bad textbook classroom. In a bad textbook classroom, the child could be sitting with a textbook and copying. In a bad MGML classroom, too, the child could be copying, but from a card – that is the only difference. So it is not as if the material by itself begins to produce effects, which is the hope many of the functionaries seem to have. I think that is really expecting too much of a miracle from material. You can have bad uses of material, just the way you can have bad uses of textbooks.

So this was the complex picture that emerged, and our study had something to say on both the pro- and the anti-MGMLwalas even within Chhattisgarh state. We were glad to see that at least in Grade 2 there seemed to be positive outcomes with MGML, which is a bit of a puzzle. Maybe it takes two years for something to begin to accrue – you probably wouldn't see effects at the end of Grade 1. That was something positive that came through clearly in the study, but at the same time, the lack of effect in Grade 3 is something that the state needs to engage with.

Our results don't completely confirm the kinds of findings that ASER has. We found that reading levels in schools are lower than what ASER claims. What was really alarming was that we found only 17 schools out of the total of 100 where at least 50 children were performing reasonably in Mathematics and Language. In a large number of schools, there were no children achieving even what we regard as the minimum. So even though it seems that there is an MGML effect, it is very small. And it still doesn't absolve the fact that in a large number of schools there is no learning in spite of MGML.

These are the key findings from the study. I will end with one last point. The state government of Chhattisgarh was hoping that we would have something more clear-cut to say – an answer to the question of whether to continue with MGML or not. Our recommendation was to take the best, a bit of this and a bit of that, which of course they weren't too happy with. For one, the government does feel that it is very, very expensive to supply and keep replacing these materials. They feel this is going to create difficulties, while a textbook is relatively easy in terms of publication, distribution

and cost. The other is that we were seeing variations of MGML, in which it was getting adapted into mono-grade situations. So while the method is actually conceptualized to combine children from Grade 1 to 4 sitting together in a learning space for distributed learning, in Chhattisgarh the material has been broken into four classes. It is being used within Grade 1, within Grade 2, and within Grade 3. Obviously, even if you disagree with the concept – not following the recommended concept – you are already creating more levels of incoherence in the way in which the method is supposed to work. These adaptations seem to serve contextual purposes but are not very consistent with the whole philosophy of the method.

So these were some of the issues we flagged and wanted the Chhattisgarh government to respond to in taking this method forward. The finally said they woul use MGML in Grade 1 and 2, and then textbooks in Grades 3-4-5. The method will not work if it is restricted only to Grade 1 and 2. It depends very much on having older children as well in that learning group. These kinds of adaptations of the programme may make it incoherent and unworkable. Thank you.

Q&A

Pranav: Two questions. One is, Sir (Vijaykumar), you scaled this programme from the pilot of 13 schools in Year 1 to all of Tamil Nadu, about 40,000 schools, in three-four years. Was there really a need for the government to cover the whole state? And was any impact on learning outcomes taken into account, as Padma's study refers to?

The second question: Is ABL really dependent on the quality of the teacher, or the children being in the classroom? When you (Anwar) went from 50 to 150 schools, even the existing 50 schools fell apart. So is it so dependent on the person implementing it, rather than the pedagogic tool itself?

Vijaykumar: When we started in Tamil Nadu, we were desperate. For so many years we had been bogged down by conventional methodology, and it was very clear that children were not learning. If a little learning did take place, we didn't know whether it was because of the teaching. So we were desperate, and convinced that an alternative methodology, especially ABL, would be a major breakthrough. While ABL was not a panacea

for all the problems in the system, we were confident it would be a big breakthrough.

Secondly, I just had one and a half years to go as Commissioner, Chennai Corporation, and was desperate to implement it before I retired – I knew that if it was left to my successor, it may or may not happen. These were the facts, maybe extraneous considerations, but this is how we went ahead.

We were very methodical. We got the materials printed and distributed in time, and created models. Thirteen schools in Chennai were initially covered as models, purely based on voluntarism. We told our teachers that our children had not been learning in schools, and there was an alternative methodology available in Rishi Valley – would they be interested in seeing it? A hundred volunteered.

When we showed it to them, they were impressed and wanted to practise it. For nearly four-five months, they sat after school hours and went through the material. We brought in the philosophy and logic from Rishi Valley, but recreated the material and improved on it. Rishi Valley did not have three-dimensional material and I think Social Science wasn't included. After the 13 schools implemented it, we showed this to other teachers and said we would support them if they wanted to practise it.

When I became Project Director of SSA, we introduced this methodology in 4000 schools in 400 blocks. For four months, the entire project team met every teacher. Our telephone numbers were shared with all 200,000 teachers. We told them, "If you have a problem, contact us." All supervisors were trained. I will not say it was 100 per cent perfect, but we were able to convert 60-70 per cent successfully.

Why was it scaled up in a hurry? It was too early to see learning outcomes, as I mentioned. In an educational programme, even four or five years' gestation is too little. But then, anybody visiting the classroom and seeing the vibrancy, the democracy prevailing, could get an idea about the outcome. I may not be a pedagogue, an education consultant or research scholar to establish this with facts and figures – I went with the gut feel.

Madam Sarangapani raised the issue about it being all at the bureaucratic level. I consider it a big compliment for us. The country is being governed by IAS officers. If bureaucrats really take an interest, things will certainly change because that is how the system has been designed. Initially, to break the impasse, one design is honey-in-the-mouth. You show a teacher the system, empower him or her, s/he practices for six months and sees the results. What can

be a better motivation for a teacher than seeing her children learning? Then you give the theory.

As a pedagogy, how effective is ABL? You see how wonderfully it is being implemented in Rishi Valley. In the beginning, there were only six schools. They were trying it for nearly more than one and a half decades, so every teacher was like a university. This is all right for a small NGO. But I was concerned about 40,000 schools, 200,000 teachers. If I expected every teacher to be a university, it would never happen. Therefore, the advantage of ABL was the structure. Our teachers are not implementing what they have learnt in their training because the system has not prepared them well. It is our failure. Re-educating them is going to be costly. We asked them to look at a module and try it out. If they were convinced, we gave them the theory. That is how we went ahead.

Padma: I want to respond very briefly to this point. What we did feel in Chhattisgarh very strongly was that MGML, for the first time, gave teachers an opportunity to focus on primary school teaching in a very methodical way. It is not actually the first time it was happening because, after all, Chhattisgarh was a part of Madhya Pradesh, and was part of DPEP. Eklavya too had worked with the government on Seekhna Sikhaana and so on. But this new crop of teachers on whom MGML was founded had never experienced all this. They had become teachers without even the real DEd training. MGML gave them some systematic exposure to pedagogy. In fact, some of the older teachers told me, "What is new in all this? We were doing this in EGS (Education Guarantee Scheme) as well." Which is true – EGS was based on a Digantar model, which was also self-paced learning.

So while it is true that teachers come to school with teacher education, elementary teacher education does not adequately prepare them to actually teach young children. The content of a lot of that is inappropriate. And ABL or MGML only focus your attention on pedagogies that work. In that sense, it is empowering.

However, I do slightly disagree with your view, although you have seen it in Tamil Nadu. What I found in Chhattisgarh was that only the teachers who understood the method were able to follow it. Otherwise there was no regard for the method. They had decided that there were six groups. Children who are very intelligent could work on their own, and children who

needed some support would get it. They had termed the levels of achievement as 'teacher-assisted', 'independent', 'peer' and so on, and they had begun to group children like that.

If you don't understand the basic principles on which it has been designed, you will start using the method in ways in which it is not intended. So I do believe that the ability to use the method must depend on understanding the method as well.

Vijaykumar: I will just complete what I was saying. I said there were two things. One was assessing the pedagogy of MGML/ABL. Secondly, how was it implemented? These are two different things. In my intention to amalgamate ABL, it cannot be right to confuse the efficacy of the pedagogy with how it was implemented – in case it has been poorly implemented in a few pockets – and attributing it to the failure of the scheme. What is the pedagogy? Is it effective? If it is a really good pedagogy, then find out ways and means to improve it. Thirdly, what ABL is today is 100 per cent different from what we contemplated in 2003, because it has been evolving. We kept our ears and eyes open, invited pedagogues, and asked them to look at the system and tell us how to improve. We have constantly taken inputs and kept improving.

Bakang: You said the theory that the scheme was not a success came from the way teachers were trained. Do you involve the leadership of the schools? If the school leadership, like the principal and heads of departments, are not involved, sometimes the programme is not successful. How do you then start that process in the school itself? Even in the 15 schools, when you left them, was the leadership engaged?

Margaret: I get the impression that we are giving importance to – or are interested in – the intellectual aspect of the child. What about the emotional and the social aspect of the child? Shouldn't these also be taken into consideration while we are thinking about learning and teaching?

Usha: I recently visited a school in Chennai and one of the first things that struck me was the happiness of the children in the school. That was very nice to see. But there were also a few questions that came up, which I'd like to ask. I think the same issue of single grading seems to be happening in Tamil Nadu too. The teacher said they had been told not to let the children sit according to whatever their

current level was. If a child was in Class 1 she had to sit with Class 1, if in Class 2 she had to be with Class 2. She also said that the cards had been reduced drastically and she was therefore dependent on the textbook. This is one aspect of it. Even if there is single grading, in the country as a whole, innovations that look at multi-grade multi-level teaching are very, very important because of the current structure.

But the other aspect is that the grading seems to be very information based. The children know they are supposed to learn this, this and this. But very often, learning happens indirectly, especially if you follow an enquiry based approach. By solving problems, learning takes place. There is space for that. But more importantly, it is the question of single grading, which seems to be happening even in the home state of ABL.

Vijaykumar: I will take that. The first question was, do we involve head teachers? In fact, we have never entered any school without involving the head teachers. All teachers, including head teachers, are trained together. The head teacher is the first person to be trained.

The second issue was about emotional development. In fact, if you just look at the pedagogy, it keeps the children moving from one step to another. They go up a ladder, complete the first milestone and then move to the second. What happens is that once they complete the first milestone, it gives them a lot of confidence, a sense of achievement, which reinforces their motivation for proceeding further.

Secondly, in a group, the older child teaches a younger child – that promotes some amount of comradeship, a team spirit, among them. In the slide of the classroom, the camera was going up and down but no child ever looked at the camera. They were all completely engaged. There was no stress. It was completely democratic.

There was an input for emotional development, but I will not say it is complete. It was just evolving. We need to improve. Instead of saying that MGML/ABL is bad, we should say that there are areas where we have to improve. Without giving constructive suggestions to improve, simply saying it is bad is not acceptable to us.

About mono-grade and multi-grade – this pedagogy is more suitable for multi-grade. It may be mono-grade, but multi-level. Suppose there are 40 children in a classroom. If all 40 children

are expected to perform at the same level, it is unnatural. Multi-grade would be better. But if a teacher prefers mono- to multi-grade, the facility also should be made available.

Anjali: What is the state policy at present? It is not ours, but policies of other states about school classrooms not being organized any longer along multi-grade lines. They are organized along mono-grade lines, and within each grade, there is this group system.

The other question, if you can address it alongside, is about the textbook. I think in those 13 schools, teaching was totally without textbooks. What is the position today? In my mind, this is a system which does not need a textbook, but there are other dynamics of textbooks. So how does this relate?

Vijaykumar: A very, very important question. Regarding mono-grade and multi-grade, when we evolved the scheme, we said Classes 1-4 were ideal. But later on some teacher said, "Sir, give us some freedom. Why are you putting us in a straitjacket?" So we said, all right, you have Classes 1 and 2 where multi-grade is a must, for 3-4, it is optional. It can be 1-2 and 3-4 separately, or 1-2-3-4 together. This is how the state evolved it. If there has been some aberration later, I am not aware of it and that may not be correct.

Regarding textbooks, it is very clear that these materials replaced them. Once you have these materials in hand, you don't need textbooks. The idea was that instead of investing money in textbooks, create readers – supplementary and graded readers. Flood the classroom with books. That was our intention.

But then we realized we are a democracy. There is politics. Our minister and government were very particular that we must completely do away with the textbook and go with cards alone. But we advised our government not to do it immediately – it would be politically disastrous. Even if it involved a big investment, we would try to integrate textbooks as well as cards in the ladder, and it was possible. So, as of now, the policy of the state is to integrate textbooks and cards. To the extent possible, use the cards. For exercises and homework, use the textbooks.

Avinash: There was one question that was, I think, addressed to Padma. Would you like to take that now?

Padma: I would like to provide you with the scenario on the extent to which MGML is being practised. What we found was that about

50 per cent of the schools were not practising it at all, 21 per cent were practising it as it was intended, and about 17 per cent had adapted the MGML.

Anwar: There was something about the teacher responding to not just the academic but also the emotional aspect. We found that when classes were organized well as per MGML, the teacher had more time to observe the children and also the learning strategies children were using in class. I think that makes a big difference, when the teacher is able to identify which strategies are better and promote them. And also to identify who the problem children are, and to address the issue – whether it is an emotional problem or some other learning problem.

Simantini: It was in the 1990s that MGML and ABL essentially evolved in the Rishi Valley surroundings. Was it primarily a set-up that thought an evolution – a compulsion – to look at the multi-grade classroom would inevitably emerge? Are we taking multi-grade to be a desirable condition in schools? And is it something we should look forward to? This is one of the issues that I would like to raise. I have seen it work in some places in Maharashtra. I don't know the numbers, but the reality of the use of cards and the understanding by teachers of how to go about it was similar to the study. There was a lack of understanding as to how to deal with it. In short, it has to do with the sincerity of the training.

But at the same time, the cards and cells we found in our state were particularly for the older age group. And even for areas where another language came into play – a tribal language – both the words and the imagery, which were supposed to be an important stimulus for the child, were extremely restrictive. It was similar to attitudes reflected in textbooks, which come from a very narrow point of view.

So we found issues that lead to alienation of the learner, lack of engagement with the learning material, and lack of engagement by the teacher to draw the context in the classroom.

Anwar: The problem was that the textbooks and the quality of cards that were produced are very generic. For instance, in Madhya Pradesh, they didn't want to get into a policy problem by creating new materials. So when they went over to MGML, they just converted the textbooks into cards. As a result, you find that the cards don't have the type of activities which lead to children

doing something interesting. They are basically reading from cards independently.

Vibha: I have seen ABL in Karnataka, and I have seen it working well in some one teacher-two teacher type of schools where there is a lot of enthusiasm. The teachers said at least they were free to do things. And I have seen the reverse in schools with many teachers, where the teacher said she actually ended up teaching on the blackboard and then getting them do the cards, and that she felt that she had no time to do anything. So I don't know whether the number of teachers are an element to the success or not.

But I was thinking, did we swing too much from teacher-centric to child-centric, and in the process couldn't that end up with this kind of card based mechanism and teacher losing motivation. You get short term satisfaction. You see children learning, and it is very encouraging. But where is the motivation for teachers to continue improving their knowledge, figuring out new ways of working with children after a few years? It is almost like saying the cards will do everything – you be there. Any thoughts on this?

Devika: Padma's critique gave a very good idea of what is good in ABL and what is not working. But you said, Sir (Vijaykumar), that if we want to say something, then we must give suggestions. I have a question which might have some suggestion in it, and it is again all about the teacher's agency.

What seems to be hitting me is this fact that you used the word 'remediation' when you talked about a child who has missed class. To my mind, remediation is all about first diagnosing where the child is – if there is a learning gap – and then filling that gap. Not a gap of absenteeism. I didn't get that sense in your presentation. Have we thought about that? And how do we address it?

In continuation of that, and of what Padma was saying about it reasonably mapping Bloom's Mastery Learning paradigm, you said possibly that is not what primary grade learning should be mapped to. We also know now that even though Bloom has been riding for more than half a century, we have a lot of other theories coming into play for learning, and we know that the cognitive sciences and neurosciences are in. I did not see these. The only thing I saw was, of course, readiness. But we are all talking about readiness, interest, as well as learning styles. I didn't see anything about the child's individual interest in terms of choosing how s/he wants to learn, in terms also of the learning style. Is there any thought given to this

new research which is flowing into education about how children learn?

Vijaykumar: When we want to evaluate MGML/ABL, we must compare it with the previous system that had been existing for hundreds of years without any result. We must not compare it with something that does not exist, or exists only in the mind as an ideal system.

When we say teachers are definitely motivated, that is the first step. All along, there has been no motivation. There has been complete de-motivation and blaming. That impasse we have broken.

For remedial, we're only saying that the pedagogy says children move step by step. If they don't move fast enough, there is scope for us to identify that there are children who require interventions. What are the interventions? How do we do them? These are theoretical questions which have been addressed by pedagogues. Even though the material and the process was evolved initially by Rishi Valley and developed by Chennai Corporation teachers subsequently, it was vetted and validated by a lot of excellent pedagogues and consultants. I may not be able to go deeper, technically, to answer your question.

Regarding Bloom's taxonomy, a final comment. I was Director of SSA. I was supposed to educate eight million children in nearly 37,486 schools. If 60 per cent of them didn't learn, I felt so bad that I thought I didn't deserve 60 per cent of my salary. That was what I was being paid for. I found an excellent methodology available right across the board, from a small NGO who did great work when schools didn't respond to normal systems. What was wrong in taking it, adapting it and scaling it up? We were lagging, we were desperate. With 186 million children's brains getting wasted every day, we were losing something every day.

So that was the spirit with which we went ahead – we ran fast, and we scaled up. We never claimed that what we did was the best. We said, "Let us light a candle instead of blaming the darkness." If you have ideas, please tell us. We will correct and improve it. Thanks.

Ramkumar: I found that the panel consisting of a practitioner, bureaucrat and a researcher interesting, to understand how they look at the pedagogy of ABL. It made me think about the kind of implicit assumptions they are trying to draw on the notion of

learning. Can a theory of pedagogy be evolved or attempted at a systemic level, looking at these three kinds of people? And can there be a solution at all? Otherwise we will be getting into such debates again and again. Is there anything like quality at scale?

Vijaykumar: When we want to evaluate MGML/ABL, we must compare it with the previous system that had been existing for hundreds of years without any result. We must not compare it with something that does not exist, or exists only in the mind as an ideal system.

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Avinash: Can we have a last word from you, Anwar?

Anwar: To respond to what Devika was asking… You seem to be looking at MGML as something very fixed: this is it, and this is what

the teacher has to use. This is not how we expect a teacher to use a textbook. The teacher is free to add to it, subtract from it, and also add to it in terms of remediation and things.

Our experience has been that teachers who had first used some other activity based methods and then used this, never gave up the earlier methods. They continued with them. For instance, we found that in Maths, there was not enough good concrete material for young children to learn with. So the teachers added whatever they had for teaching place value and so on.

So I think it should not be used as a very mechanical ladder, but we must keep on adding in terms of amount and new material. The other thing, which Padma was also alluding to, has to do with the fact that activity centres today are very mechanical in the way they exist. It may be self-paced learning, but it does not really help a child to learn in a constructive fashion if used in a mechanical sense. So again we have to think about how teachers can add to the type of activities available, and how children are also allowed to add to explorations within this. If you don't allow this, obviously it will be very mechanical.

Understanding Systemic Change and the Role of Civil Society

Dhir Jhingran, Hridaykant Dewan

DHIR JHINGRAN has over 20 years of experience in primary education – with the government as well as NGOs. He has been Mission Director of the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Secretary (Education) with the Government of Assam, and Director in the Ministry of Human Resource Development in the Government of India among other things. His areas of work include development and management of education programmes focused on improving the quality of education and enhancing student learning, early grade literacy, multilingual education and so on.

HRIDAYKANT DEWAN (Hardy) has a long and distinguished record in the field of education. He started his academic career in Delhi University as a professor of physics. He then became a full-time member for the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme (HSTP). He was also a key member of Eklavya, and was associated with Lok Jumbish and DPEP programs as well. In the mid-90s, he was a key driving force for the setting up of the Vidya Bhavan Education Resource Centre, and is currently associated with the Azim Premji Foundation.

Dhir Jhingran: I want to first do a quick recap of the education scene from the side of the government over the two decades or so that I have been associated with it. The National Policy of Education had several schemes: the DIETs (District Institute of Education and Training); PMOST (Programme of Mass Orientation of School Teachers) and SOPT (Special Orientation for Primary Teachers) – at that time huge, countrywide, very centralized training programmes for primary and secondary school teachers; distribution of maths and science kits; and Operation Blackboard, which was basically for the construction of school buildings and classrooms.

That was how it was in the late 80s. Literacy and non-formal education (NFE) were very important sectors at that time, and a lot of work in the central ministry and the states was focused around it. Then came a time when external aid started to become centre-stage. Starting with the UP Basic Education Project, the Andhra Pradesh Primary Education Project (APPEP) and, in a way, Lok Jumbish, they were sort of precursors of DPEP later. They were district plans.

I am talking more about these programmes and not policies because policies really did not get converted into anything substantial. In the late 80s-early 90s not many NGOs were working with the government system. It was not that easy. We have examples of Eklavya, HSTP, etc. and large numbers of NFE NGOs of all varieties. BGVS (Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti) and many others were quite active, but very few worked with the government system.

Then came the time of DPEP, from about 1994 to 2000. There was a greater openness in the system with focus on innovation and some experimentation, in a wide range of aspects – curriculum, teacher training, infrastructure, out-of-school children, and setting up of academic support centres like BRC

and CRC (Block and Cluster Resource Centres). A lot of the work on school based MIS (Management Information Systems) – which is now DISE (District Information System for Education)and UDISE (Unified District Information System for Education) – started then. There was experimentation, not necessarily based on evidence or what worked, but because the flexibility existed. In every state people experimented with things – with NGOs or as individual experts – and a lot of new school designs were initiated.

There were new initiatives also for out-of-school urban deprived children. Many experiences from outside the government – for example, CINI (Children in Need Institute), Asha, Sister Cyril, NV Foundation and others – were brought into the mainstream in some ways. Of course, like all government programmes, there were things that were centrally mandated, like Village Education Committees and MIS. I don't know if you have heard of them because those institutions have almost died now.

Some research did begin, though limited and not of very high quality. But even at that time – and it started with that time – the system was largely kept out, because the feeling was that there was an urgency for universal elementary education, and our institutions, like the Directorates and SCERTs (State Institute for Educational Research and Training), were not in a position to do things quickly. In fact, the Joint Secretary who then headed the DPEP mission wrote an article in which he said, "Let not the dead seize the living." His argument was that we have to work outside the system because the system is virtually dead and we have to do many things.

This was also a time when many NGOs – Bodh, Digantar, Eklavya and more in North India, and many others including those that worked with children with special needs, migrant and out-of-school children – were very involved and there was a lot of sharing. But even at that stage, there was really no model of involving NGOs and other organizations, of working in a long term arrangement with organizations.

In the early SSA years, some of the innovative spirit of DPEP continued for about five-six years. There was a lot of work around bridge courses, the NV Foundation was involved, certain aspects got picked up and there was infusion of new ideas from civil society. There were also a large number of quality improvement programmes at that time. Some of them were state initiated. Andhra Pradesh had CLIP, CLAP (Children's Language Improvement Programme and Children's Language Acceleration Programme) and more; other states had other programmes. But the defining feature

was school expansion, para-teachers and the EGS (Education Guarantee Scheme) kind of schools. That was the situation in the early 2000s.

I have been a big critic of the way SSA shaped up after2006. It sort of coincided with my leaving the ministry, but it wasn't to do with that. That was the time to break out of having a fixed set of activities with standard unit costs. But SSA didn't reform itself at all, and just became a programme where funds were given out at the beginning of the year. In a two-hour meeting, the Approval Board decided on 20 activities, and those who were not interested in innovating simply followed those activities – a one-size-fits-all approach.

Better governed states had a history of work in education – say, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and, to some extent, Madhya Pradesh. They had their own ways of doing things – reforms in recruitment, transfers, the ABL (Activity Based Learning) approach in Tamil Nadu, the Karnataka State Quality Assessment Organization… But largely, whatever was required by SSA was just being implemented.

New multilingual education programmes came up in Andhra Pradesh and Odisha around this time, starting around 2004-2006. And then, of course, there was the NCF (National Curriculum Framework). It was slow to start with, then there was a push. But it largely took the shape of the states being given NCERT (National Council of Educational Research and Training) textbooks and asked to do something similar. NCF is still a document largely not understood in most states. So I wouldn't say there was very much imbibing of what it was about; it was more about the tangible aspects of NCERT textbooks.

In the Teacher Education Scheme, too, there was a revamp. Some, like Hardy, were associated with workshops over three or four years. There was a revised scheme, and the Justice Verma Commission Report. But somehow, there was no impact in the field, either in terms of the health of the institutions like the DIETs or SCERTs, or in the way that pre-service or teacher education was organized. So during this period – the late part of SSA – these parallel structures, which should have actually got completely abolished by 2002-3, continued. And in many states, they still do. Therefore, the SSA society, SSA structures and the departmental structures were often working at cross-purposes, and that too still continues.

The third dimension was DIETs in teacher education.

Everyone had their own programmes and there was a synergy, at least in the district and below, not even at the state level. That was a big problem in the later part of SSA.

Then there was the RTE (Right to Education). I feel it is very ambitious in many ways – very aspirational – and fixing time limits for things without getting the system ready for it has been a big issue. The system has seen it basically as quickly getting grants from the SSA for teacher appointment, infrastructure, etc., and then seeing how much happens with it.

The last three-four years, post RTE, have been about new schools, infrastructure, and the so-called tangible aspect of CCE (Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation). We just completed a study, and I must tell you it is not doing too well in terms of what is happening in the states. Then, of course, teacher recruitment, the TET (Teacher Eligibility Test) model, and the open and distance learning programmes for the backlog of teachers who are untrained – that's what has really been the thrust in the last few years, in the government system.

There has also been, in my understanding, a sense of reduced openness to civil society, not because anything has prevented it. In general, it is about two or three things. One, there are a lot of things to do: there's a list of SSA activities, the Right to Education Act, and everything has to be done quickly. It also has to probably do with the way SSA has shaped up. Language issues, for example, have fallen by the wayside because there are a lot of big things that have to be done in a fixed time frame.

The involvement of NGOs in civil society has become even more cumbersome if the arrangement is long-term. They are asked to do things quickly, and I am told that fund release is a big issue, as is procurement. This is not new, and happened even with DPEP. It is very common to do a base line and end line after six months and show that there have been huge increases in learning outcomes.

We have a crop of educational/administrative leaders who seem to be impatient. Many of them don't come from the education sector – that is a problem. I think that even though we should be in the fray for the long haul because we are sort of done with the programmes hopefully – SSA is definitely on the way out – it is time to look at education with a perspective. One big hindrance is senior bureaucracy heading education departments and ministries. They are very whimsical, with changing priorities, and person-dependent. The common complaint of NGOs is that you go and talk to one secretary, and six months you've got to re-educate a new

person.

In the last few years there has also been some focus, more drummed-up, around learning outcomes. It has coincided with ASER's reports, around which there was initially a lot of interest though they are more routine now. People are talking about outcomes, but the shape it has taken for the ministry and states is to do large-scale assessments, as if assessments are going to improve outcomes. Everywhere, states have got funds for large-scale assessments. And the same resources in the SCERTs and DIETs, which could have been used for something else, are now going into preparing tests and working with these external agencies doing assessment. Now, assessments are not a problem in themselves. But if they are seen as the answer for everything to improve learning outcomes, that is a problem. I see every state being consumed by this.

The last point I want to make here in terms of the scenario in the last five-seven years is that we've got bigger NGOs like Pratham, Azim Premji Foundation and, to some extent, even Vidya Bhavan. They have more influence and are able to engage with state governments around curriculum and pedagogy issues, textbook renewal, etc. Some of them have actually started to set up state teams housed in the SCERTs or state offices. Many of them now have leverage because they are also providing man- or woman-power to the state SSA societies. That is useful for state education departments because when they say, "We want to do this – how do we do it?" there is someone available who can respond and take it forward. UNICEF, of course, has been promoting initiatives in some states – MLE (Multilingual Education), early childhood, subject forum in Karnataka, etc. Some of the smaller NGOs are, however, finding it difficult because the space outside the government system has contracted, also because of RTE (Right to Education).

The last development which I want to mention is CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility). It is definitely out there. Corporates follow a different way of doing things, and it is an interesting mix. They have come into curriculum and pedagogy issues in certain states, and it is a good time to understand how different kinds of organizations with different orientations work together.

If I have to say one thing about these 20 years, I would say education has been very centrally driven in terms of priorities. States that were not thinking on their own fell in line doing

exactly what was required for those funds and activities. That is a defining feature – whether for SSA, RTE, and to some extent even NCF. All of it was flowing from the centre. Civil society space and possibilities also changed with these different priorities. During this process, systemic change really fell by the wayside because everyone was busy implementing programmes. Again, I am talking of states that I have visited more often, not so much in South India but Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Jharkhand, Assam, West Bengal, UP, Bihar and Rajasthan.

A few other points...

Curriculum and textbooks: There has been some tinkering with them after NCF, in many states. But some weren't clear as to what the change was about, why the textbooks were different, what was different about them, what the difference meant, and if teacher preparation was required for them.

Teacher education: I mean not just institutions like SCERTs and DIETs, but what it means to work with teachers on a continuous basis from the pre-service stage until when they are teaching on a regular basis. That hasn't seen much of a change.

School supervision and academic support: We have BRCs and CRCs. Today the ministry actually says CRC is a failed model. It is so unfortunate to hear that it has been given up. But in the government school system also, the whole BEO/SI (Block Education Officer/ School Inspector) machinery has never kept up with the expansion of schools, and academic support has got dissolved in other tasks.

Assessment reform: We have CCE but, as all of you know, studies show that it is very formulaic and procedural. It is not about what happens in classrooms and how you help improve learning. Examinations still continue – there is very little reform there. If you say that you want to shift from rote memorization and content to skills and concepts and knowledge, the exams haven't been reformed in that manner. There has been no serious work around assessment reforms but we are doing large-scale assessments.

Teacher recruitment: There is the TET.

Transfers: Some states, if very few, have good policies. But ten per cent of schools are single-teacher schools, 40 per cent are two-teacher schools. So obviously, we have not been able to work well on this.

Educational administration: Whether at the district or block level, this is left out completely from programmes and new things that come into the system. RTE, of course, has a whole set of reforms that have been implemented in some manner.

So in these 20 years, systemic change somehow fell by the wayside. For anything like the RTE or even learning outcome to happen effectively we need to have a rights or entitlements orientation in the system, which is completely missing. Right now, it is as if because something is mandatory, we have the funds for it and implement it. There is a focus on outcomes, but people don't really talk about who is or isn't learning, and how we can ensure that all children learn. That is not a priority focus. I call this systemic – this transformation that is required in the teaching-learning process. We have imposed CCE on something that is not CCE-friendly at all.

So what is probably needed is a focus on the teaching-learning process and how it can be changed. Much of it is in the realm of beliefs and attitudes. I have a few random ideas on what civil society can do, and I hope it will trigger thoughts and discussions.

A lot of training is happening, but what is the gap there? Understanding the classroom and how it functions; inclusion of all children; working with teachers about basic beliefs, or specific subjects, or about science and maths; getting into things that haven't been discussed earlier. Can all children learn? How does early literacy develop? In the last ten years, these haven't got that much importance. So we need to focus more on that than just helping with a maths or science programme that a state is doing.

Many organizations have been trying to create classrooms that are different. You can see how assessment can happen during the course of teaching. What is the feedback from there? How do children get different learning experiences in a multi-level situation? Those from the government system can go to these classrooms to see clearly how different the system is.

Many organizations are engaging with institution building, and it requires a lot of preparation. But some have not been ready to work with the SCERTs and DIETs. Of course, there is the huge issue about the administrative reforms required for it. You can't do much if there are no people there, or they are just waiting for the next posting, or they have no interest in teacher education. But this is an important area to focus on for systemic change.

We have created the institution of BRC/CRC and there are some good people there. Can there be some rationalization in the documentation and data collection work that happens?

Are there other ways in which teachers can be supported in an on-going basis inside the school – as a place where they

come and think together – or at meetings, or through materials that go out to them, or through participation in programmes that are not directly in-service workshops? Can we look at areas where the government doesn't do very much? It does an annual round of training programmes. But if it is a maths training session, can we support teachers with more activities around mathematics, and get them to dialogue with us in some ways, like, for example, the forums in Karnataka – a reform of the way in-service training is done in a workshop?

These are the priorities. I always think educational administrators – BEO (Block Education Officer) level people – are left out. Can we try and loop these people into programmes, and get them to understand quality issues?

Government programmes often neglect what happens outside the school. And we know that education and learning is an ecosystem – there is a lot that happens outside. Can we therefore work a little more with mothers/parents? We talk about reading and literacy in a classroom, but if there is absolutely nothing that a child gets after going out of school – like a community library or reading room – then that is a problem. These are things that are really not the target of government programmes. And then, of course, there are migrant and street children, who have language issues – the government system does not focus on them.

We could push for medium-term kind of arrangements of working with governments. In fact, we circulated MoUs that Assam had with the NV Foundation, and that other states had with other organizations. Can we also try and have a vision, and longer term agreements with state agencies? It is easier said than done but we should try and move in that direction.

NGOs, among themselves, need to work together more, collaborate more, with a sense of common purpose. I have been to states where different NGOs do their own thing. They don't actually sit together and create a forum for themselves at the state level – the country is too wide a base – to look at priorities, at what others are doing, and try to then take some positions. For example, we know that many governments are trying to push through things to do with large-scale assessments that may not be the most appropriate. So can there be a sort of ethical group that looks at what we stand for and will not compromise on – even if state governments are ready to involve us – on certain thematic issues? For example, if there is a demand to do a census in a particular state to assess all children as a part of a large-scale assessment, maybe an organization could have

a stand on why census based assessments are required when you want to understand the problems and trends in learning across a few years.

Thank you.

Hriday Kant Dewan (Hardy): There are a lot of interesting points that Dhir has made, aligned with what I was going to say. But I will probably put them in a different framework and state them in a different manner because I am looking at it from a different perspective – more from the perspective of civil society. So it will help look at the whole picture.

The first question is, what is the system? The second is, what is civil society? We also need to see how the term 'civil society' has changed over the last 25-30 years. The last question is, what can be, should be, is allowed to be, the role of civil society? These three are distinct issues.

We are talking about the public system. There is this confusion about what is public. In a democracy, it is anything in the public space. In that sense, private schools are also public. Many of them are called public schools. But here we are looking at public as government run and government controlled. In fact, RTE goes a long way in trying to define what it wants to control – government schools and the government aided schools. But the public system also has influences on what is called private, because the curriculum, the textbooks and the assessment are in the domain of public education. Public is therefore a larger space. We need to recognize that because we often forget that the private school is also governed by the public system in some manner.

When we are talking about change, we mean it in the positive sense. So there is a need to define what is positive. In education, as in agriculture and technology, we often realize that things that we were talking about 50 years ago come back after a lot of exercise in some direction. System change, therefore, has to be seen as something that goes and comes back, and we need to unpack the term within that process.

Who are the participants in the process? If you look at system change in terms of teacher change, it is important to recognize that many civil society organizations work with the teacher as a unit. So you have a voluntary group of teachers organized in different ways to come together to discuss and share, and in that process, change their own classrooms to whatever extent

they can. So when we think about the role of civil society, we can't ignore these groups. They may not have influence in defining what the state SCERT should be doing, but they do on what the teacher should be doing.

Then we can look at the school as a unit. Many new processes came up as civil society worked with and people set up individual schools. So there we are looking at the school as an aspect of system change. Why is it important? Because all these teachers as individuals and schools as systems also will, in the long run, change the discourse in education and have some effect on the larger system. What the impact is of these small explorations into making things meaningful and then merging into a mainstream, on the experiments and on the mainstream, is something we need to think about. So it is a larger issue, but part of the question when we discuss systemic change.

We could also look at a cluster and a block as a unit. So we keep coming back to this: what should be the unit of change? In many instances that Dhir talked about, we have constantly been exploring this idea of a reasonable size of a change group. Can it be a cluster? The school is influenced by a lot of pressures it cannot withstand. So can a cluster withstand those pressures? Can the cluster define itself as autonomous? Can the block define itself as autonomous? Does the change have to be for a state or country? Or can change happen in the country, state, block, cluster and school, all together?

We can say that the process of change includes all of them separately, and also together. So in understanding the process, all these elements need to be thought about because, eventually, what has to change is in the classroom where teachers must have a key role. There are stakeholders in each of these things. As they grow bigger and bigger, their relative role and their power become very different. The nature of intervention that is possible also becomes different. If you are a teacher, yourself the change agent, then the kind of intervention you can do is a lot more. But if the state, the Education Secretary, is a change agent, the kind of change is different.

The most important question about change is the space for the agency, flexibility and exploration – what somebody called 'creative engagement' yesterday. This is very important. Unless there is creative engagement of a person, there cannot be a meaningful process. If you say that we want meaningfully engaged classrooms, you need a space for the teacher to be creatively engaged. Whether that comes from a state driven, or a cluster organized, or a school

based programme is something we need to explore.

The other challenge would be consistency of underlying principles. In the kind of programmes we talked about – DPEP, SSA – which are large programmes, there are many competing terms that you need to use, like summative and formative assessment, CCE, child centred, and competence based, with competence defined in a certain manner. These terms are not always consistent with the underlying philosophy they come from. So if you are talking about inclusion, you cannot talk about summative and formative. Diversity can't be about everything happening in the same manner in every classroom. The questions we are talking about have to therefore have a certain consistency in the underlying principles. And then there has to be alignment across the system with those principles for the process of change to be actually reflected where it should.

These are the constraints, the necessary elements. As far as NCF is concerned, I don't think we have even reached where we need to, to try and have an understanding of what underlying principles it is talking about, leave alone alignment at each level. That process of change therefore requires a time-span – far more than three-five years. But we are becoming more and more impatient for reasons not necessarily to do with children or the need for hurry to improve the system, but from a different perspective. We need to be aware of them – not just from the outside but also inside – when we talk about intervening in the system.

The second big point is civil society. What is it? What constitutes it? Why is it needed? We say that civil society, in some sense, is non-government. So anything that is non-government then becomes civil society. At the moment, there is no other definition of civil society. So you would have a widely different spectrum of people, and what one particular group may think of as civil, others may not. Yet they form the same set of civil society intervening in the public education system. For the purpose of education, we are limiting this set to a certain category in this room, and similar people outside.

Like Dhir, let us start with how the structure and the nature of these organizations have changed over the last 30 years. The nature of who can be the external support has also changed. An interesting example is the Kishore Bharati and Friends Rural Centre, which went into school education by accident. They wanted to do social mobilization along the idea of development

and inequity. One wanted to promote development and distribute the largesse from development to more people; the other wanted to organize questions around development and hand over control to the people. They came together to start what is called the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme, with the idea to improve the teaching of science. The properties of these institutions were aligned but different. This is to show how civil society often comes together with many different purposes and objectives in mind. It also leads to processes which, over a period of time, lead to separation and divergence in ways. In this case, it led to a common child – Eklavya – committed to the idea of intervention in school education. The first document that was created for Eklavya was called 'Micro-level Experimentation to Macro-level Change'. This was the concept of Eklavya, of which I was also a member.

Today I speak against this fundamental idea of micro-level exploration to macro-level change. I say that macro-level expansion and effort is a different exploration – it has nothing to do with micro-level experimentation. You can learn some things from it, but it has to be conceived, constructed, visualized and organized very differently.

Before Eklavya – there are similar organizations in other areas, like Pradhan, not for education but for professional assistance for rural development action – there was this criticism that voluntary agencies or civil society organizations were largely Gandhian. The emphasis was on sacrifice and voluntarism, no salary and no professionalism. Eklavya and Pradhan, starting around the same time, started the idea of bringing professional competence into social intervention in education and development. Pradhan was about livelihoods and Eklavya was for education. This, over a period of time, has converted the sector of development into a development sector. We have issues of rural management and programmes now in social work. So what started as a voluntary professional choice has become a profession. We need to recognize this also in the matrix of thinking about system change.

Now we also have organizations working for profit, providing technical expertise in all sectors of rural and urban development. So it is no longer left to funded organizations but also to professional organizations that charge fees. In a sense, we are now acknowledging the worth of technical expertise and inputs. Therefore the language of dialogue of working with the state has also changed.

The reason why people who think differently, who have a very sincere commitment to make a change in school education, may find

it difficult to intervene is because the language and conversation would be around topics on which they disagree. They may realize that, but the state would want those terms to be part of the conversation in starting a programme. So something that is not technical, more related to changing the way the teacher thinks about her job, becomes a less possible way of intervening.

What is the role of civil society? We have a government system that has funds, expertise, and a lot of people with salaries – in fact, it has more qualified people than are sitting in this room. So why is this sector needed? We need to understand that to help clarify our own role. We are concerned in a long term sense. We bring in the concern of the people, of different kinds of stakeholders. We act as a watchdog because the government system has a tendency – as do large NGOs – to say that they make no mistakes, whatever the situation. To accept "I don't know what to do" is not possible for it. And if NGOs and civil society, which are outside, can't also say, "I don't know. I have to think about it," then what they can bring in becomes that much less.

We are also able to act as bridges for stakeholders. There is a very strong sense of hierarchy in the government system. At each level, the officer – with exceptions – believes that the person below him doesn't know anything. The Education Secretary believes that teachers don't want to teach, and that they look for teacher-proof learning material or technical aids rather than invest in teachers or teacher training. So there is no forum or possibility for listening to the teachers' voices.

One of the things done in HSTP was to try and create these structures of communication across hierarchies – from the teacher to the Commissioner of Education, sometimes also the Education Secretary. There were many people who helped in that. The fact is that we are able to talk to teachers as well as to the Education Secretary and the SCERT Director and the Director of Education as friends. If we can't do that, then we are failing in our role. As Dhir said, if we are only doing what the Director is saying, then we are no better – only better qualified – than subordinates in the government system. The role of the civil society has to be to tell this system what it ought to be doing, listening to people at different levels. To me, this is central to the purpose of civil society being in the system.

Then there are the changes in the bureaucratic system, as Dhir pointed out. One Secretary goes, one Director goes, and the next one comes in wanting to do something totally different. As

one Chattisgarh Education Secretary – a friend of mine – told me: "You do what you want to about this textbook development. You have a ten-year project. I am here for two years. I want something in my CV." So the idea of continuity and holding across political formations and bureaucratic changes is one of the things that civil society participating in state programmes can do. It needs to have an independent stand and vision against which it can then match the programme of the state government. It must have its own plan on education or whatever its chosen area of intervention, constantly try to negotiate with the state government to bring it in alignment, and have a consistent input process for that.

Stakeholder consensus is very important. How do you get the bureaucratic machinery at the higher level, even the State Education Officer, to listen to the concerns and the problems of the teachers? How do you make the teachers listen to the concerns of the system? In building bridges across different hierarchies, you need to know where consensus is possible.

Then there is the question of being self-reflective and critical. If the government system could itself be so, it would be ideal. But we hope that civil society will be self-reflective and critical and therefore also help the government system to become so. Civil society should recognize this. There are dangers and constraints, however, in being self-reflective and critical because your funding support is critically linked to your saying "I did not make any mistakes"! The point about critical change centres on the ability to recognize mistakes, experiments that did not work, that we don't know, and that we need to know every moment of our work in our system.

The last important thing is bringing in fresh ideas of explorations and allowing the same to everybody in the system. So it is not that I, as a civil society agent, have the responsibility of translating my ideas, my programmes, my materials, and saying that teachers must use it. To me, the role of civil society is essentially to ensure that teachers are empowered to find their own strategies and materials, and whatever we give is to empower them to do that. There needs to be a conscious process of building that in the system, in our own minds and in our interactions.

I will do a brief sketch of the organizations and the extent of their adherence to these principles. HSTP started as the first major experiment which led to other programmes of Eklavya and the Lok Jumbish programme, and subsequently the Bihar education programme which was informed by Lok Jumbish. Many Eklavya

members were part of the drafting design of Lok Jumbish. There were stiff battles even there, and Lok Jumbish compromised on what was considered to be pragmatically possible and what some of these people, who were a part of the process, wanted to do.

HSTP was just one civil society organization group interacting with the state government. It tried to bring out people from the state government and make them participants in that process. So the team of all the Eklavya programmes included teachers – college teachers from Madhya Pradesh, the District Inspector of Schools, and higher secondary school teachers. It was a joint effort of a lot of people from within the system, yet the system never recognized it as a programme. The Government of Madhya Pradesh issued a manual, and had a Sanchayan Samiti officially organized which was supposed to have regular meetings chaired by the Director of Public Instruction or the Commissioner. Once when we forced a meeting, the Chairman, Public Instruction said, "I have come for a war meeting." The meeting was part of the government structure, the invitation had been issued them, yet the notion was that it was a programme of civil society organizations.

So we need to live with this – that there will be always this fact of change being associated with an outsider. In the Lok Jumbish programme, since there was no Eklavya, Lok Jumbish became the outsider. The subsequent backlash was that Lok Jumbish took the best officers and the best people, and used the best resources, and so on. But Lok Jumbish was not government, and what it did the government could not do.

The desire of the system is to protect itself on any process that it wants to change. We need to be aware of this as we think and hear about each other's work. It is easy to be influenced by what somebody says about somebody else's work – because the system is trying to protect itself from that change and from you, simultaneously. So there needs to be an independent assessment for each civil society organization about the worth of the other's work. You should not base your judgement on what the system is telling you.

Lok Jumbish was later looked at as something that had to be destroyed from the root, because it had settled so deep. And a lot of the effort of DPEP, which was subsequent to Lok Jumbish, was aimed at trying to remove the vestiges of Lok Jumbish from the system. What was important about Lok Jumbish, as far as civil society was concerned, was that it defined two kinds of roles for

it. One was resource organizations, and the other was implementing partners. Resource organizations were recognized as those who would be exploring, helping to design materials and building the intellectual understanding. Implementing partners would build bridges with the community, and work with them in order for these ideas to be shared with teachers, parents and schools. At the pace at which Lok Jumbish worked, in the years of its existence it did a lot of development work but did not move beyond implementation in two blocks – something which was not acceptable to anyone. As a result, DPEP, which followed Lok Jumbish in Rajasthan, was paced much better.

The role of NGOs – their partnership – was nixed, in the sense that while there was a lot of freedom to explore, the framework was defined by Lok Jumbish and it had to be around MLL (Minimum Levels of Learning). You could not work with Lok Jumbish and question the idea. MLL and competence based learning were the critical factors, so some of us who did not believe in this approach had to struggle. We were not able to intervene with them in the upper primary stages, which was only a pilot. Because of Eklavya's extreme competence in that area, and there being no alternative – there was no MLL available in upper primary – Eklavya was accepted as the group who would produce the upper primary programme in science and the social sciences. In mathematics, where they thought that they had a capability to produce the competency/MLL based programme, they thought they would do that. What I am trying to say is that even with Lok Jumbish, Eklavya did not have the kind of freedom it had in working with the state – and this kind of freedom has progressively become less and less, in terms of the scope.

The interesting thing about Mahila Samakhya is that it started along with Lok Jumbish but it has not expanded to the extent that DPEP has. We need to think about why the state was not so keen on making it a DPEP. Or were the people involved in Mahila Samakhya themselves of a nature which did not allow it to become a DPEP? It was also not organized like Lok Jumbish. Like we were told yesterday, Mahila Samakhya only had a framework of 'we can't do', not what was possible to be done. Therefore, there was a lot of possibility for individual states and individual districts to explore around.

Basically, as we go forward, we are looking at less government support for programmes. For example, Eklavya was supported by MHRD (Ministry of Human Resource Development) and the state government. MHRD created a scheme to fund experimental

organizations working in education, which ended around 2003. Then support came from corporates, who have also now started to move out and set up their own organizations.

Therefore, the support for organizations wanting to intervene in the public education space – also in the public development space – has decreased. The increasing emphasis as far as the state is concerned is that support should bring its own money, not only for itself, but if possible, also for the state, even though the state keeps claiming that there is no lack of funds. There are no funds available for making this support possible because there are a lot of competing voices that are raised when money is spent. The process therefore has to be so complicated that either the one who is most technical or who can manage the most is able to compete. So the support for these organizations across the board is shrinking.

The last thing which I think is important – Dhir also mentioned it – is that in the last 20 years, and increasingly in the last ten years, there is more machine-mode intervention. We are in a hurry to improve education in the next six months. And we are reading increasing prescriptions – all of us. We talked about why NGOs can't work together. Why do they work as competitors? The fact of the matter is the lack of clarity in support funding. The need to ensure our future makes us competitive, makes us follow the diktats of the Director, and say that things will change in six months' time when we know it will not happen. We do a lot of things that are not necessary because it is the only way we can persuade somebody to support us. And we hope in doing that we are at the same time also doing something positive and helpful in the direction in which we want to move.

The nature of civil society has changed because the number of players has increased, because the nature of people in it has changed, and because the need for it has grown. But the support for making this possible, and the mechanism to ensure that it stays around some definite tracks, is not there.

So when we think about civil society, we have these three basic questions. Each of these requires deliberation and thinking, and the recognition that we need to make the system respond to the teacher, the community and all the stakeholders – not just to the wishes and whims of the Secretary and the Director of Education.

Thank you.

Q&A

Simantini: Both these presentations have taken a kind of historical overview of the 70s, essentially. But the last five years onwards, particularly formulated after the 2009 RTE, is the PPP (public-private partnership) mode. And that is not just as far as education is concerned – we see this in almost every activity. Since we recognize education to be something everybody likes to be in, with all kinds of interests, it would have been nice to have heard your thoughts on that and for you to connect it also to civil society – this goes beyond that, in a sense. Although people do construe it as possibilities of intervention by how you have defined civil society, it needs to be problematized. Would you like to talk about that? Because I come from Bombay and all our schools have been given out to PPP.

Jacob Tharu: I want to raise a general point, but it leads to Hardy's list of the system. You talked about the teacher, the school. Now, I find that what is missing there is something called the mandated syllabus and the curriculum – because that is where the battle is, isn't it? It seems to me that should be added, and all our discourse has to be in relation to the extent to which you have a centralized or an evolving curriculum, which is where teacher autonomy and all that comes in. I would like to throw that in as something we need to pick up in our conversation and not take a position.

Prasoon: Hardy, when you define civil society, why do you exclude the government? Do you think we are making a historical mistake by doing that? Because once you say that government is part of civil society, it becomes important for civil society to locate itself, defend itself and also reflect upon what it is doing.

My second question: As civil society which would be aware of what to get, what are the problems we see in the government that become a part of civil society's problem? For example, my own experience is that we often tend, over a period of time, to ignore the ignorance we get into as a part of civil society. We are not able to properly reflect upon the constraints under which we work, the qualities we need to develop for ourselves to address certain problems, so we end up unaware of our own ignorance. What do you think?

Vijay: You mentioned civil society in the context of education. But

even within that context, this 'civil society' is very broad – not just the organizations, but also individuals. Giving an example, we have hundreds of voluntary leaders – 100 per cent voluntary – who are playing the role of watchdog for how government schools function. And they are actually influencing a large number of government schools in making them function as fully RTE compliant. There are large numbers of such community leaders at the slum level or village level. They are also part of the civil society.

Vishnu: Dhir and Hardy talked about this 'let's do things quickly' idea among a lot of senior bureaucrats. It's been a theme recurring since yesterday. We are doing this seven-state evaluation of ABL programmes. In these studies, one of the things we see is that the system is under a lot of pressure – not just teachers. Whether it is teacher trainers or even at the Principal Secretary level, everybody seems to be under some kind of pressure. I would differentiate that from a sense of urgency. What I mean by pressure is that there is a degree of anxiousness to do something quickly or show something, which is actually counterproductive. So my question is: what might be ways in which civil society could influence the state or other actors to take a more patient and long term view, appreciating their concerns in this matter, and giving them a framework or matrix or route map where their need is also addressed, and at the same time getting away from this short term thing which we know will not work?

Arvind: With Eklavya's experience, I can say there are some aspects where we seem to have failed, or something doesn't seem to work. And I feel quite intrigued when Dhir says, "Okay, let's get into a three-five year arrangement." This is exactly what is not feasible. Earlier, we had ten years of work, coming down to five years when I started in 1995, and now almost down to one year or six months. Sometimes I feel, are we making fools of ourselves? What is the system trying to do?

I was once shocked when the Secretary of Education told us, "Why are you wasting so much time and energy in trying to do this? This is not something that can change." He was absolutely well-meaning, because he was not associated with education. He had come from some other department, and probably been there one or two years. What I am trying to say is that there are certain market forces which are working, and there is a giving

up of the welfare state to some extent. I am not putting it in black and white. But when you face a situation in which – sometimes straightforwardly and sometimes covertly – you understand that this is not what they are trying to support in a long term sense, you know there will be no long term engagement.

I sometimes find it difficult that having worked with ten state governments and NCERT, none of them is thinking of working on teacher education. This is a matter of fact. Everybody knows that making textbooks is not enough. It doesn't take expertise to understand that you must engage with teachers. What we see is a very deep reluctance towards this, and a very easy falling-in with teacher bashing. So where is this going to go? It is good to at least bring up this pessimistic view to figure out where we are. We should engage in a slightly thought-out manner with how the whole system is working out.

Deepika: Yesterday and today, all the examples that were shared are more of collaboration with the state, and therefore assuming that the state is open to collaboration with and intervention by civil society organizations or individuals. But you both also mentioned the role of civil society as watchdogs, and the whole issue of equity and inclusion in the political and social discourse.

One, how much openness of the state do you see towards such issues? Two, are there any examples of civil society engagement which are creative confrontations where civil society plays the role of watchdog, especially on issues of discrimination that the state does not want to accept – in schools and in the educational system, be it in textbook, pedagogy or classroom processes? What is the way to engage on those kinds of issues? Are there examples of bringing about a systemic change in the education system by any creative confrontation or on these kinds of issues of equity and inclusion?

KK: Both of you spoke of how everybody is in a hurry – the government, the bureaucrats... I was trying to connect that with civil society. Why don't we say just 'society'? We are now defining civil society, and finally the fellow who is being talked about doesn't know whether he is civil society or not.

Jhingran was rightly pointing out that RTE was in a hurry. CCE is in a hurry. Everything is in place, but the people who really should own it, for whom it is meant, they do not know. What do we do about that? Basically, it is necessary to talk to people – whether you call them civil society or categorize them in some other way. I come

from a category that talked to people and I have had the fortune to enjoy the benefit of their understanding. When society becomes knowledgeable, when they collaborate with a programme, then it becomes much more creative.

The initial days of literacy are an example. We did not decide what to teach. They decided. They created the primer. They told us on which day to teach the people in the coastal area, how to go to traditional Muslim areas. Why do we have to give all the solutions? Are we big doctors to solve everything in society – and without any faith in society?

If we want to work with civil society, we must have faith in it. What we should do is to talk about things. In the initial days, we used to have something called Educational Parliament, with education experts. But most of the questions were not answered by the experts. There should be more of those kind of opportunities.

CCE, for example. I have visited several schools where teachers gently tell me, "Sir, we really do not know what it is." Despite circulars systematically coming onto the internet from the headquarters of CBSE, nobody knows about it. As a result, somebody evaluates and says that that a child may be given an opportunity to play football, so let me give some marks for that. He has not seen the football; the teacher has not seen the football. It is only an assumption that in the co-curricular evaluation you can give some marks.

Yesterday I mentioned that all of us working in different areas should find a way to continuously enter into dialogue with different sections of the community. It should become an essential part of all activity. There was this beautiful evaluation report that Padma Sarangapani presented on an experiment with the children of Chhattisgarh– are we going to explain that to the parents of Chhattisgarh, or discuss it in this room?

Dhir: I hide behind what you just said – experts don't have answers! So, just a few points, not very many concrete examples. This thing about the system under pressure... it is very difficult to say what the pressure is. You talk to the SPD (State Project Director) and the Education Secretary and it seems to be what was mentioned about trying to shove in something in a limited time. It is not that there is any big pressure. Sometimes it is that the ASER reports have placed us very low, and either we want to do our own assessment to show that we are not that bad, or

because there is that ASER report we want to do something – that pressure.

The other problem is again what Hardy mentioned. The hierarchy is so strong that although people in the SCERT or DIET know what should be done or what won't work, they don't speak up. The culture of reflection, of just hearing out others, doesn't exist. I don't know if this will change but, like Hardy said, there would be a bridging of what people at other levels are saying, and bring it to the knowledge of the seniors who decide things.

As he also said, civil society – or organizations, so we don't get into the broad definition of 'everyone is civil society' – has a responsibility of saying what is not appropriate. So it is not about one person or organization agreeing or not with another – everyone will not – but at least creating a code.

For example, prescriptive packages... Everything is laid out for the teacher. I think teacher-proof, is what Hardy said – basically saying that if you follow these steps every day, nothing can go wrong. This has never worked and never will. It may work for a few months under supervision, but not afterwards. Can a stand be taken on this? Teachers understanding concepts and why something is important, consultation with teachers, preparing teachers for something new, discussions... these are steps we have known for some time. How do we ensure that we convey common messages to senior people in the state to say what is important? That is one thing I can think of.

The other is to lay out for these senior people the fact that clarity of vision is essential. Can we do this? Can we work a little on what the vision is, where we want to reach three years later or five years later, and what the road map is therefore? So again, the responsibility is on organizations that engage at that level to say that we have got to have a vision, a sort of theory of change.

Creative confrontation was mentioned – some organizations, having done that, have then found the space. One of the organizations in Bihar tried this out and they got the space to do something about inclusive classrooms in Dalit dominated areas. I think it is important to create a challenge and question. Only then will you get some space to try and experiment on something and say, "This seems to work."

Hardy: Just one or two things. One of course is the fact that if you look at the handing over of schools to corporates, in one sense it seems to be something we feel very worried about because, as Prasoon said, what is democratic in a democratic country? And

given the nature of today's decision making processes, can we really explore that if Eklavya can be given schools, why can't somebody else be given schools?

Some criteria should evolve. We need to understand the terms under which these arrangements are made. We need to examine the terms and what is wrong with them, and whether they actually benefit from the inclusion of the marginalized into schools or not. There has to be a nuanced discussion.

Most of the states had the system of what was called grant-in-aid institutions. The participation of societies from the general public who were governing the schools was considered to be a good idea. In fact, in many states, the government was inclined to support more and more of these societies rather than set up its own schools. But of late, the support for such societies and schools has declined. On the other hand, there is a different model of school, where you hand it over to a corporate or an individual, which is also a problem – not about giving it to a corporate, but the arrangement of handing over the school. So we need to talk about and understand those terms and what is wrong with them – why an education process cannot be governed by those kinds of terms. It is important to investigate this, but in the essence of what it is rather than the label.

Another point came up, about syllabus and curriculum. They are very, very integral parts of education and the process of change. The NCERT was established in 1961, the SCERT subsequently. Even before that, we had schools and teachers. We had no board examinations till the matriculation system. So there was a syllabus. Who made the syllabus? In many states, there were not even textbooks. The school and the teacher chose books. So the question about who makes the syllabus has to be reformulated. The NCF too argues that a teacher should make his/her own syllabus. So NCERT, in principle, should not make textbooks and peddle it to all the states.

There is also the question about syllabus and curriculum being within the grasp of a teacher. I can argue as a teacher – I will not defend it, but I can argue – that whatever a teacher can formulate as syllabus and curriculum is the only thing that can get translated into the classroom. So the only thing you can change in making a difference to the classroom is the teacher. And unless your teacher is a teacher, the rest of whatever you are doing is pointless. That is the central piece and you need to address that. What we have been doing in the last 20 years is shying away from

the main piece because that requires giving the teacher autonomy, and recognizing that teacher as not just a number in your education system but as a human being. That is difficult for the system to do– to manage teachers as individuals, at this large number, at the pace that they have expanded.

So I am just placing the problem. Don't ask me for a solution. I don't have it.

Pranav: Any kind of results we see from the government, on assessments or anything, tend to segregate levels of learning in government schools and private schools. So what should be done in this regard in cities like Delhi and Mumbai, where schools are largely becoming privatized? Should the government take a more active stance towards learning levels even in private schools? Because they are also equally low.

The second question is, assuming that autonomy is given to teachers in all the things you have described, do they then have the means to execute them well? Do they have access to this repository of knowledge, or a technical blueprint? Is that in place before we give autonomy? Or should we look at the sequencing of that as well?

Sreekanth: This is actually a question about structures and models, and differing roles and responsibilities. In the Mahila Samakhya session, there was this interesting point about how the organization is a guiding force and the implementing organizations are the Sanghas. It is designed such that the exit is clear. At some point the Sanghas have to take over. If you look at the People's Science Movement, there was a lot of emphasis on volunteerism. There were organizations, but there was as much talk about individuals coming together for a collective movement, about impact on policy. A lot of publishing happened within the movement.

So what are the patterns and insights we can draw from some of these ideas into school education and the way we are organized? How can we organize and collaborate differently so as to have better impact?

Shaheen: I want to add to what Sreekanth is saying about the volunteerism and movement issue. What we understood from KK and others yesterday was that this is a time and space of a certain kind. We are now in a different kind of a context. So how does something similar apply to today's context? And what should we try to look at to create a similar movement – or a different movement – today?

Ankur: Specifically with regard to education, has civil society got bogged down, distracted by the technical, even at the cost of the political? Building on this, I want to comment on the issue of volunteerism and new forms of engagement. I like the point being made. We need to really start questioning what we mean by this term 'private' because if we don't engage with it, there is a danger that we will be either all hypocrites, or completely irrelevant. And we need to confront it in the manner that I thought you were, when you said that there was nothing like a private school. A school, essentially, is formed for a public purpose, and that's the bottom line.

I want to bring in something which maybe speaks to the issue of volunteerism. At IIM Ahmedabad, we worked on the 25 per cent mandate to admit children from disadvantaged sections into private schools. We did this primarily on the basis of volunteerism. We had more than a hundred volunteers – students from IIM and other colleges who would otherwise not have engaged with issues of education, not seen education as having this public purpose. And I can give you numbers in terms of saying that in a city where this was not at all being done, we have had, in the most recent year, 5000 applications come in primarily through awareness, through talking about the Right to Education and then saying, yes, this is available.

I realize that the problems faced by other people who also support this mandate were probably not there. They are the ones who are also looking for school vouchers, supporting an increased privatization of schools. There is this tension. But in education you can't avoid these tensions. And to be honest, it has worked for us because the mandate was for something which our students and those from other colleges could easily understand, get involved with, and get motivated to work. The younger generation is in a much bigger hurry, and they could see some immediate impact of their work.

We need to figure out ways to equalize. There is inequality and segregation in education, causing inequality and segregation as far as our attitudes, values and beliefs are concerned – and these will be the ones really dominating the social space and its resources. So we need to start confronting these things more, in ways whose outcomes we don't honestly know.

Prasanthi: I want to better understand the question you were posing about Mahila Samakhya – if the people in it themselves

limit the programme to what it is, so it does not make it to DPEP. Mahila Samakhya is designed to facilitate processes in the community rather than implement any kind of programme. That's what makes it unique. It has been like that for 25 years. The preparatory activities of Mahila Samakhya make those in the community take charge of their lives and also bring issues to the forefront in schools.

So as Sreekanth was mentioning, Sanghas – and the federations, at a slightly higher level – are the implementing partners for education, not Mahila Samakhya. But yes, at one stage, where the implementation of KGBVs (Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas) or NPEGEL (National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level) is concerned, Mahila Samakhya was a partner of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. But then, there was definitely friction with the regular school system about additional inputs that Mahila Samakhya wanted to bring in – in terms of life-skills education, or gender sensitization for teachers, or additional classes for adolescent boys and girls on changes happening to them at that age that are not spoken about or taught in the curriculum, though it is there in the syllabus.

I also wanted to raise a question about pre-service teacher training. We have been raising this for many years now. The focus is on teacher training when they come into the service, after they join. But in the B Ed or DEd, or before that, teacher training is not focused on, nor is gender perspective. Equity issues are not brought into that syllabus. Why is it so?

Vibha: From yesterday, hearing about organizations and movements, what is coming out as common among all of them is that it is as if all civil society organizations present a slightly rosy picture. These are examples, I know. But generally, the sense is that their intentions are good – maybe the implementation is wrong, or they fail because of lack of support from the government. But in today's scenario, there are so many civil society organizations coming up that we need to start questioning the intentions of some of them. I mean, they could be non-secular, neo-liberal – having whatever influences. Therefore my question is, how can we ensure a system of self-regulation by civil society organizations? Because otherwise, there is a danger that the government is going to step in and we might see that what is happening with – I don't know if these are appropriate examples – Greenpeace, Sabrang Trust, may happen with education also. I am not casting allegations on

anyone. But I think that with the number of types of civil society organizations and who is backing them, the kind of CSRs and all that, we have to ask the self-regulation question.

Anjali: Some reflections we need to take back home, particularly about how we look at civil society and at the state, and at government as part of the state. Clarity on that is required, and we need to revisit that idea as we go along. I tend to go with the conception that those of us who are part of civil society are not part of the state or the government. The government, in a democracy, has a certain accountability system through Parliament. Civil society's accountability is posed through the funding process. We report to whoever funds us, and they get third-party evaluations and so on. But we work with the government, or with communities. So that loop somehow becomes weak. That is one of the issues I would like to place – about the transparent accountability of civil society space.

The other thing that I had been wondering – again to do with funding– is that there are situations where corporates want to fund, and when the government wants to fund. The intentions, I think, are different. Government, as we have seen earlier, has widely supported civil society organizations with funds. With NFE schemes in the most difficult places and the most difficult issues, the government wanted civil society organizations to step in. That is their responsibility – the government should not be doing that. With backward places coming more into focus – which is a good thing – civil society must come and pitch in.

Many of us get lured into a stop-gap kind of thing – doing this, doing that. I am not casting aspersions. We have been working with the state the most. I think it is time for that kind of reflection. Where do we want to place ourselves – in the community space, outside the government? A watchdog role and a collaborative role with the government can't go together. Eklavya has gone through various phases of trying to resolve this conflict. We cannot publicly criticize the government if we are working with it. If people like us want to criticize, there are problems. Therefore we are putting the collaborative role first. The watchdog role gets left out and the strong community/civil society voice weakens. We need to deliberate on that aspect – how we come back to the space, make it accountable, and work further.

What we did in Madhya Pradesh with DPEP is one example, where the TRSG (Technical Resource Support Group) was formed

and three or four organizations would report to it. Eklavya had been working with the government for 20 years before that but regular accountability was set in. It may not have been the best process, but there was a process.

With Eklavya and Digantar entering that space, Madhya Pradesh was the only state – correct me if I am wrong – where it was not resource persons who didworkshops or curriculum development, but organizations that were given curriculum space to work in. That space has since closed. And I am now questioning whether that space should be for universities and professional organizations, or if it should be given to civil society organizations like us.

Rohan: I am interested in the question about teacher agency. You mentioned teachers as agents earlier, and I guess I can speak from personal experience of being a teacher in England in a government school – in a sense, it was a public-private partnership actually, which is part of our system. I never thought of myself as being someone working for the government. I was a teacher. You may know of The Times Educational Supplement, which has online resources for teachers. It is very popular and online opportunities are obviously much more for teachers in the UK.

But when we are talking about the scope that is there for the teacher to engage with an online resource, for example, and also the extent to which the teacher has control over what is happening in his or her classroom, I have been reflecting on to what extent that freedom is there. Because, can we not think of ourselves as working with teachers? If we are working with teachers, then as soon as the teacher steps into the classroom, they do have that freedom. People can't be there the whole time. Do we get caught up in thinking too much about governments in our whole structure?

One thing we are doing at Aman Biradari in Delhi – though it is in the early stages –is putting together an online repository, specifically around social issues. The idea is that teachers are able to access that and, obviously, in our planning, we come up against the issue of accessibility – the digital divide. This is something we will encounter and learn more about as we go through the year, but there was mention of the idea of a repository so I thought I would talk about this. Over the next few months we are going to put this together and we are hoping teachers will access it and use it. We will be running some courses and involve them in a process of curriculum development for their own contexts. Our bias is towards social issues. But if others coming from different perspectives,

whether it is maths, science, or whatever, are interested in collaborating and adding their resources or expertise, it will be good to talk to them.

So the thought is this: you can have an independent teacher and you have access – online access, then what is stopping you?

Usha: My question is twofold. One is to do with different styles of partnership. As Anjali also mentioned, should some spaces be taken by institutions like universities, to fulfil certain roles in this partnership? I have been working in the area of health with UNICEF and the Government of Telangana and there are different constraints. But I see a lot of analogies with the education sector. UNICEF, like most large NGOs, is very much Excel-sheet driven. They have an annual calendar, targets to be met, and so on. The government works within its own constraints. When a supposedly neutral partner like a university steps in, we still see ourselves as civil society, I think.

But the constraint really is because of the ways in which these two other parties function. You feel that whatever value you bring as an independent critical perspective is neutralized by the programme design that a partner like UNICEF brings in, and the politics within the government system. So there is a different kind of a dynamic there. If that is the kind of partnership one should be looking at, we need to think about what it implies.

The other part of the question is again from engagements with healthcare personnel. What we find is a very deep sense of cynicism in terms of what programmes can do, and there is a similar cynicism also in the education sector. So when working with teachers – or with healthcare workers – the feeling is, "What is one more training workshop going to do?"

Matt: There has been a lot of discussion about public and private, the role of civil society and how we are affected in that situation. We should be clear about a few things. India as a democracy has decided that there is a very large role for the government to provide free public education to children. And then, on top of that, you have said that the role of civil society is being increasingly prescribed.

If you go back on that 25 year journey, you said we had a lot of scope for NGOs to set up a school, to intervene in different ways. Increasingly, the government is actually putting more and more restrictions on this. Some of it is a sign of maturation, that

much of the work that we as NGOs might do is actually shameful – I say 'shameful' because these are things that the government should be doing in the ordinary course of events. But it is maturation that the government has recognized it is not serving the population well, not capable in these particular areas, does not have the skills to properly train teachers and are finding that teachers are quite weak in some fields. One of them is this learning centred education where we have students leading discovery in the classroom. But what it does is to generate textbooks that seem to embody a certain approach, and produce teacher-proof type of solutions.

Now, where we as civil society have a role is in prompting the government to figure out what actually does work. We know that the teacher is important, for example. We know that RTE is not being implemented throughout. Private schools do not really want to deal with disabled children – or with children who have been out of school for six-seven years, because those children are hard to teach. Despite our efforts in creating aspirational frameworks and legislation, there is a fairly large role for us to play.

Where we get to choose that and how we do it is one of the fundamental decisions we have to make. But we should be very clear about the things we already know. We know that our teachers do need support. We know that skills are weak. We know that it is not actually easy to set up a school, and maybe not even desirable these days.

But as we look at these partnerships, if you think about this journey that we saw explained by our two presenters and think about the comments that people shared from their own experiences, we should recognize the things that have already been learnt and build from that. Especially when we think about some wrong-headed decisions that we have seen, like very short schooldays or one-teacher schools, these can be very effective in advocating for change.

Vishnu: We talked about a local syllabus which the teacher could make, and a curriculum framework from NCERT. We talked about volunteerism on one hand, and on the other that discrimination is not acceptable but a community might feel that it is perfectly fine. How do we marry these things?

In my opinion, both are simultaneously true. So I think there are certain principles which are important, which we might hold to be self-evident, and they will not lend themselves to compromise, nor do you want to compromise on them. At the same time, if we confuse

principle and practice – if I advocate a practice or a procedure very tightly – that becomes an issue. We have seen a lot of that in the ABL sort of implementation. Where the distinction between principle and practice has been understood, there you have far greater success – you trust that people will understand the principle and, over a period of time, they end up understanding it and refining it, actually improving the articulation of that principle.

I will share a term from management guru Tom Peters, from his book *In Search of Excellence*, written with Robert H Waterman Jr in 1982. What these writers claim is that the best organizations in the corporate world have simultaneous loose-tight properties. I think it holds for larger systems as well. When you start understanding this, you might start separating the role of the state from the role of the, say, practitioner, who is the teacher. So maybe – like the person from Aman Biradari was saying – the state has to provide a body of knowledge and offer it maybe online, maybe as a booklet.

Even in the ABL implementation study, we find that a self-learning material kit evokes far more interest and engagement on the part of teachers than a 'use the ladder this way, divide the children in groups this way' approach. So somewhere we need to understand what the procedure is and what the underlying principle is, and make these decisions explicitly. Some senior bureaucrats may intuitively understand this but it is not consciously realized. When we are talking of teacher education, I think we equally need education for senior bureaucrats and entities such as civil society.

Bakang: I think we are really learning from this conversation. I wanted to check the situation in India about teacher representative unions, because in South Africa we have unions that are civil society and very political. I think we link the process of working with them very well, in the sense that we include them in all programmes in our schools. But it is not an easy process.

So the question about civil society and trying to explain who we are, for me could also mean the practitioners, community practitioners. With reference to the volunteer process mentioned in your presentations, South Africa has totally changed in the sense that NGOs using a lot of volunteers and giving low salaries have shut down because they cannot be sustained. A lot of those people who actually have expertise have been taken up

by other organizations that can pay them a lot of money. And now, in terms of change, these NGOs, who are calling themselves social entrepreneurs, are saying that we could go into this space and change from an NGO into a company in order to be sustainable, and still do community work. If we are dependent on funding from the government, it is not sustainable. If we depend on CSI (Corporate Social Investment), it is not sustainable. But if we give service for the work we can do, then we can sustain ourselves.

It will be interesting to know if your school unions are as political as Africa's. Some of the school don't even want to work with us.

Dhir: I think most of what has been said are reflections and things we should keep thinking about. A very diverse set of organizations are coming in now, and I don't know whether it is possible to have a common sense of purpose and motivation. But be aware – definitely. And those who have big funds obviously have a greater say.

I really like that point about technical versus political. I think that is often missed in trying to work through just plain technical interventions. I would say even the centrality of the teachers is a hugely political kind of position. Very often, many organizations are not actually doing that, and are working on textbooks or material or a particular training programme.

The point that Anjali made about watchdog versus collaboration is crucial. I don't know if you have to move away from one role completely. If you are an implementer, then you will obviously not be able to go into the watchdog space. So there could be different organizations doing different roles. But it is true that most people want to now work with the government and collaborate. Therefore there aren't too many organizations in that space, except those working with the RTE Act kind of forum and such like.

If we can put a stop to new programmes, that would be very good. Every year there are new ones, as if they are the dawn of a new education. There again, some education for the senior bureaucracy and others would be useful.

Unions in India are not as strong and influential. In most parts of the country today, there has been a decline in their influence, and they have largely engaged themselves with service and compensation kind of issues, not so much about quality and training and materials.

Hardy: In Andhra Pradesh, and maybe some other places, there were very strong teachers' unions engaging with issues of what

should go into the school, and of systems of teachers learning for themselves. But once the DPEP took root, it stopped all that because it usurped the space for the teachers' own desire to build capacity. The capacity building of the teacher as a continuous effort became state mandated. And when it is that, whether you want to or don't want to do it, you have to do it.

In India, we have seen a movement away from the state or corporate supported organizations to those which work for profit, and there are education companies in this space. But then, as you would have seen in South Africa, there are also dangers of being in that space. Maybe not all organizations in that space in India have lost their basic moorings, but there are a few that have, and are therefore no longer working towards the purpose they intended – to work in the social space to improve education.

This question about all kinds of NGOs is important. But I also feel that unless we have a framework and solid examples, this is also like corporate bashing, and I don't want to bash any category. Of course, I am proud to be from some of the leading NGOs of the country, but I am not sure whether all the others are corrupt and should be avoided. We need to take a more nuanced stand. If we don't, if we brush everything under the carpet, then we miss out on the possibility of using whatever is available in a meaningful manner. That's the danger, both with corporates and with social sector organizations.

One of the problems with a long term perspective is that we need to recognize there are two players we have not talked about. We have not talked about the politics, although we have referred to it. Education is a political space. The teachers – whether they have a political organization, or whether they individually have the agency or not – have so-called leadership which has its own perceptions about what is or isn't good. Often, though they seem positive in the short term, they are not aligned to teachers' own interests in the long term. So there are complications.

Then there are ministers of education – like the bureaucrats of education – who may not have a deep interest or sense of purpose. And they have their whims and fancies. So a five-year-long plan hinges on many variables.

One of the things that Mahila Samakhya has shown is that if you have the Sangha as the implementer – in our case we have to see the school, the teacher or a cluster as an implementer – then the possibility of that being re-manipulated is lower. But you set up a system at the state or district level, you put in a lot of effort

to make a change, and it is so easy to destroy that effort with the same pen that allowed it to start. The effort at the state level is so individual centric. If we have an Anil Bordia at the centre, we have a scheme for supporting voluntary organizations. If we don't have him, we don't have that scheme. So if we could set up a process – which will be slower – where we can think of units of independent functioning, which once created are not so easily destroyed, it would be ideal. The Sanghas have shown us that possibility. We will have to look for similar units in the context of our work.

In the policy on teacher education today, which the Government of India has published – which nobody is even aware of, and certainly is not intending to use – there is an emphasis on looking at teacher capacity building as a continuous process from pre-service, and continuing into an in-service programme, where a structure of something with this continuity has to be visualized. But we are not thinking about that, although it is there in the policy document.

Ramkumar: Suppose we had the freedom on paper to dismantle the current education system and create a new one, what could it be? What kind of imagination, creativity and expertise in a group can add up to the creation of a new system? We have been talking about the past and the present, and not moving towards the creation of the new.

Can states create their own structures for effective delivery of education? Can states come out with their own models? Say, 30 states and 30 models – can that be a possibility? Why is it that – considering the RTE and CSR programmes – children are not learning? Why is it that we have maintained status quo of the same models being implemented, and discuss them again and again? Can we think of something fresh, not thought of before?

Devika: This is a very simple question relating to what Ramkumar was saying and pointing to Hardy's presentation. In all this discussion, where does the onus lie of actually creating this new mental model? Which is this new system we are talking about? Obviously, we are talking about systemic change. We are not happy with the current system. So where does this lie – who is in charge of it? Which is the learning organization in all these steps – the teacher and the school, the CRC and the BRC, the state and the government and so on – that will actually be able to define the kind of model we want to move towards? Where is that exercise happening, or where should it happen? And how do we really prepare society or civil

society, or NGOs and everybody else who wants to come in and work in the schools, to actually envision this system?

I am using the words 'mental model' to mean everything – the paradigm, the mindset, the world view and whatever other words we might use. So what is my idea of good learning? – because there cannot be any other goal for a school except good learning for every child. It can be defined as the same thing that came from Ankur – the kind of concepts and skills and attitudes I really want, to make sure that every child in every school learns.

How do we make sure that we are on the same page where teachers are concerned, using their personal agency, as Aman Biradari was correctly pointing out, and also the society, which comes from the outside? How do we align with the same kind of goal? What is the effort required for that?

Hardy: Since I have to declare the session closed, I will say two sentences on this. A lot of people want to say things, and there is a lot to be thought about, because actually there are no answers.

It is very critical to recognize that we need to move out of model building. Education is a process of living. You need to understand the things around you to the best of your ability, and then work towards trying to build something which you think is constructive. It is not possible for us to construct something, and we have no locus standi to say that somebody should try out what we have created. No structure will give us that space. So I don't think it is appropriate for us, with our limited experience and understanding, to capture that space. All I can say is that with our limited experience of our own lives in this space, if we can think of some of these questions, develop our own stances, be clear about those stances and keep reflecting on them, and recognize in them that whatever we require for our creativity, initiative and purpose must be allowed for the group that we claim to be working for.

If we just stay with these two things we will be okay, rather than trying to build models for what others should do. If we start thinking of what we should do and how we should govern our own participation and actions, that is the most deeply political and educational act that we can do.

That is all I will say because I don't see myself as competent to begin to think about a model, or what everybody should be doing. Even if I gave it, I think none of you would accept it. And you should not. Thank you.

Experiences and Perspectives of UNICEF

Aruna Rathnam

ARUNA RATHNAM has been associated with UNICEF for the last few years as an Education Specialist, working particularly in the state of Tamil Nadu. Earlier, she taught at Rishi Valley and other schools. She has also worked with Vimala Ramachandran at ERU Consulting in a few studies, and also published various papers.

Aruna Rathnam: UNICEF has 13 offices in India and I have compiled the work many of my colleagues are doing in other states, though I myself have been working in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, from the Chennai office.

UNICEF has a very peculiar space not only in education but even in the Indian developmental scene. Actually, it is a latecomer to the education sector. Till the 1990s we worked more with child development, early childhood. I don't know how many of you know this, but the seed money for the Amul project was given by UNICEF. Mark 3 pumps were popularized by UNICEF. This was the kind of work UNICEF was engaged in those days. Survival – child survival – was the focus in the 80s. Only in the 90s, with Joyful Learning, did UNICEF come into education.

The kind of space we have to work in is defined by the Country Programme Document, signed by the Government of India and UNICEF every five years. In the states, we do a rolling work plan every two years. But even though we say two years, just like the SSA (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan), it is basically a one-year cycle because it is dictated by the budget and so on. Things get more complicated by the fact that UNICEF's financial year is the same as the calendar year. So there are a lot of constraints.

But I want to come back to the space that is unique. Many of the constraints of civil society organizations, as discussed in an earlier session, also apply to UNICEF. At the same time, simply because it's a UN organization, we a have a certain amount of elbow room. But there is also a lot of responsibility.

There is a saying in UN organizations that UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) knows everything and does nothing, WHO (World Health Organization) knows quite a lot and does some things, and UNICEF knows nothing and does everything! You will see evidence of that.

You can broadly divide into four areas the work we do,

particularly in education. One is a convergent kind of work, under the umbrella of Child-Friendly Schools and Systems:

- Life-cycle Approach: We have a hand in early childhood as well as adolescent education – RMSA (Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan).
- Enabling environment: A lot of work with the community, CSOs (civil society organizations), and community-based organizations.
- Capacity-building: Training, and such things. Those from the Vidya Bhavan Society, I am sure are familiar with that, having worked with UNICEF in many states.
- Knowledge management: Evaluations and so on, like the Seven States study.

These are the broad areas. Child-Friendly Schools is a name we have given recently. Fortunately for us, the phrase 'child-friendly' also occurred in the RTE (Right to Education) Act. So now it has become a very convenient vehicle for us to actually get schools and teachers to look at child-protection issues – the POCSO (Protection of Children from Sexual Offences) Act, safe schools, and things like that. Basically, any time we get any extra money and nobody knows where to put it, it goes towards Child-Friendly Schools, covering a multitude of projects like water, sanitation, health and hygiene education, school health programmes, and safe schools, like I said.

We have a life-skills programme, which started as the Adolescent Education Programme in HIV-prevalent states. It is used in the KGBVs (Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya), and Mahila Samakhya has also done a lot of work with us. Then there is child-rights advocacy – for instance, the huge RTE campaign, Awaaz Do (Raise Your Voice) on social media.

Early childhood development work is what I am proud of, because that is where a lot of work is actually needed despite 30 years of ICDS (Integrated Child Development Services) – maybe because of it. This is one area where Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat have done a lot of work. In Tamil Nadu, we are now not only doing the traditional ICDS work but also trying to get early screening and assessment for those with disabilities, early intervention, counselling for the parents and so on. That is something that UNICEF has traditionally done. We gave it up in between and have come back to it. Especially after the RTE Act, School Management Committee (SMC) work has been done largely under this enabling environment.

Last Saturday and Sunday I was at the Juvenile Justice System

Consultation, where child welfare committee members from every district had come, as well as four High Court justices. We were trying to get the Juvenile Justice System to talk to the ICPS (Integrated Child Protection Scheme), which brings children in need of care and protection into the system and places them in orphanages and homes.

All these get done even under education, because education necessarily becomes a de facto child protection site. This is the toughest work we have been doing. Activity Based Learning (ABL) comes under this. In Tamil Nadu, ABL is only partially supported by UNICEF, but this has been a major area of work, and very varied. In Bihar, for instance, pre-service teacher education curriculum is being done through distance education, whereas in Tamil Nadu, we provide only technical capacity. We give them the material, and they design and put it into their curriculum.

Physical education is another area we ventured into. We have a huge module. A lot of money came from the London Olympics Committee. They promised the International Olympic Committee that if they got to host the Olympics they would lend technical support to create interest in physical education. The material is very good. It's actually physical activity, so that even if a child who is three or four years old has slight dyslexic problems, you can identify them because there is a lot of left-brain-right-brain-connection.

Subject teachers' forum is one area where really interesting work has been done, supported by UNICEF. This again is what UNICEF is usually known for– especially things like dissemination. Kameshwari and the Mahila Samakhya people worked on the gender atlas. It uses DISE (District Information System for Education) data for several indicators and it gives a very graphic picture of where our girls' education is weak, what happens, and so on. It is very shocking. Even progressive states like Kerala have pockets of this sort of thing.

There is a very nice book on Child and Family Services (CFS) standards – a collation of case studies and so on.

In many, many places, particularly in Kerala, we work with the Institute of Local Administration. Although the Chennai UNICEF office has about 14 or 15 people, in Kerala you will find UNICEF working at the panchayat level simply because of these kinds of associations. This is what I mean by 'unique space'. We get to work with very unusual government partners – not just with SCERT, but also with the Planning Commission,

for example. Tamil Nadu is going to have a state policy on children that will be spearheaded by the Planning Department and Planning Commission.

Because we are an international organization, we are able to get a lot of case studies and information from other countries. So it is very interesting work. Even though I hold a PhD in Education, it is because I have been with UNICEF for a period of time that I have been able to work in different areas of this kind of work.

NGOs are our left eye and the government is our right eye. If one of them doesn't work, we lose our sight, lose perspective. Striking that balance is very difficult. That is where all our problems are, and all our successes. There can be no dissemination without NGOs – the kind of work we do becomes just technical. Very often, simply because we are part of the UN, we put on the technical garb to mask the social and the political, and sometimes end up like the Emperor's New Clothes. It's like the vulcanizing process. Rubber, by itself, is brittle, like government processes. Without civil society partners, the NGOs, and a catalyst like UNICEF, the rubber wouldn't get the strength it requires to ply on the road. So everyone has good roles to play.

I want to emphasize the language issue. If all of us had been allowed to speak in our own mother-tongues, the morning session would have been much livelier. There would have been more fights over contentious issues. English flattens out a lot of contours in discussions. In many of the child protection and education issues, we do not have technical papers or notes. One failure of CCE (Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation), I would say, is that. Have any of you read a translation of the NCF (National Curriculum Framework) in any of the Indian languages? You can't read it! The one in Tamil translated 'collage' as 'college' in the Art Education section – and this was done by the Tamil University! It is unreadable.

How do you teach reading and writing in the mother-tongue to children who already speak and understand it? A child who comes to school is actually able to tell you some coherent story with a lot of abstract concepts in it as long as it is in the mother tongue. We are however not able to teach literacy to a child who comes with this kind of wealth. And this is a very crucial thing we do as NGOs and as civil society, as support to public education.

NCF is one of the finest documents I have read. But the problem is that it does not reach the teacher or the parent. CCE, for instance, is a very good thing for children. If the parents know about it, they will support it. But there is no attempt at all to reach them. SSA gives

money for this. But the translation is just done on Google. You correct one or two words, print it, say 10,000 copies have been distributed to school management committees, and it's all done and dusted. For UNICEF, this is a difficult issue. If we were to do this properly, the results would be very good, in various ways, for children.

I am sure anybody who has worked with UNICEF has had frustrations because when we first come and meet you before starting a project, we talk like technical people. Once you give us a proposal, we become programme managers: Where is the SOE, statement of expenditure? Where is the voucher? Why doesn't it have a rubber stamp? And so on.

I was recruited to UNICEF because I was a technical person – I had worked as a teacher, as an activist with the Tamil Nadu Science Forum, with Vimala as a Research Associate. They thought such a person would be respected in Tamil Nadu and Kerala. But as soon as I joined, the first thing they did was to cut the budget. The previous year, when there was nobody in education, the budget was 250,000 dollars for Tamil Nadu and 150,000 dollars for Kerala. After I joined, in the first year, they gave me 50,000 dollars for Tamil Nadu and 40,000 dollars for Kerala. But it was such an interesting year that at the end of that year, the Commissioner for Labour called me and said, "I want to write an appreciation letter. You have been very supportive. How much money did you give this year?" I said, "Not one cent, because I didn't have money." But what I did was to sit with him on every review meeting and write notes to say, "Sir, why don't you try this for child labour elimination?" So we gave him technical advice, in Tamil and English, and he never realized that we gave no money. But I got an appreciation letter saying that UNICEF had been very helpful in child labour elimination in Tamil Nadu that year.

That kind of balance is very difficult for most of us. I have been lucky to be in Tamil Nadu, because the government there is full of programme managers so I don't have to worry about things like SOEs. I don't have to worry about consultants. I give the government names of five people who are the best and they talk to them and bring them over – I don't have to give them a contract. In Maharashtra too, things are slightly easier, because we don't have to do so much of programme management with the government. So we can focus on technical aspects. A good example is Kerala, where we had several consultative workshops initially for mathematics education from pre-school to 12th

Standard with a few people from the Homi Bhabha centre – first for one week, and then two weeks of people going there. Michael Apple came – there was an international consultation with him on restoring the social and the political in school education.

These are the kinds of things we are able to focus on when we don't have to do programme management. But given that UNICEF is a donor agency, we do end up doing a lot of that. So if you have problems with my colleagues in your day-to-day working, it is partly because of donor conditionalities and pressures.

Actually, with regard to public-private partnership, UNICEF does not have a position. Whatever I am telling you now is from my experience – from what I have read and what my colleagues have been sharing with me. Right now we don't directly work with all schools. But then, when we do a state policy for children, or state rules for the Right to Education, many of these things do apply to private schools.

For private-public partnership, Kerala and Tamil Nadu have this thing called grant-in-aid. In the 20th century, schools were set up in a rush of patriotic fervour when the colonial government said that Indians didn't care about their own people, because there was illiteracy and so on. A lot of rich people – zamindars as well as industrialists – approached the local government and said that if they were given land they would put in money to set up schools and run it. If you look at Kerala, something like 60 per cent of all children in the system in the Malayalam medium are in grant-in-aid schools. In Tamil Nadu, it is about 45-50 per cent now. The reason why these two states are so well advanced in education indicators is partly because of this.

Till 1980, the state governments did not distinguish between grant-in-aid schools and government schools. They were treated on a par, because school education was under the state government. It was a state subject. In 1980, there was an amendment and it was transferred to the Concurrent List, and all the centralizing processes started from there. When DPEP and SSA were formed, they said grant-in-aid schools were private schools and would not get anything from them. As a result, some of the best examples you can see of public-private partnerships that have actually stood the test of time are about 100-150 years old in this part of the country. They have run very well. Children have come out of there with complete learning achievement by any test, not just ASER. Yet those have not been documented, and not recognized as successful models of public-private partnership at all. It is a pity.

There are very good models for public-private partnerships, like in Denmark, for instance. What a school should be like is specified by the government, and the church or local council or anybody can run it and is accredited. There is monitoring and academic support from the local education department. So it need not be corporate. But it is very necessary for us to remember that the broad spectrum of child policies needs to be in place, or needs to be created by a public system including NGOs and CSOs – not just the government. In the Mumbai model, the problem is not so much that the DIETs (District Institutions for Education and Training) are running it, but the haste and the very haphazard way in which it was handed over.

This last thing is a big, big issue, and the toughest work in the UNICEF and within the government. The example I want to give you is the early screening of pregnant mothers for disabilities. The first screening can be done in the second trimester and after that, when the child is born, there are developmental milestones. In the first year, there are six very basic things that a visiting anganwadi worker or educated mother can watch out for. If the child does not meet those standards, she can be taken to a paediatrician, who can refer her to a specialist. If the child does not turn her head when a sound is made on the right side, she has to be tested on an audiogram available with very select hospitals or ENT specialists. Now, if you are a poor mother, the PHC (Public Health Centre) doctor gives you a referral, but you don't understand what it is. This is where, again, language comes in.

So you go to the nearest private doctor, who says there is nothing wrong with your child, she just needs vitamins – or as is popular in Tamil Nadu, an injection. We believe in the efficacy of injections, which is why Tamil Nadu is probably one of the topmost in immunization – 97-98 per cent immunizations happen in Tamil Nadu.

Actually, the child has to be taken to the district government hospital. There, in order for you to see the ENT doctor, you need to go through two or three levels of paperwork. And there is no guarantee that after you get through all this, the machine will be working, because nobody understands how these things run. If there is no electricity, you can't get the test done. So most mothers don't go there. This is the situation even within the Chennai Corporation, where there are four or five centres for this kind of testing.

We recently decided to do a check, and found that the centres with machines don't have doctors, and the centres with doctors don't have the machines. It has taken me two months just to get the Health Department of the Corporation to talk to the medical education people. Finally, next week, they are going to at least try and see whether MS and MD students of Paediatrics will at least come in once a week, just for this testing, to the places where the machines are available. I did not put any money into this – all I needed to do was to just keep on meeting the official. It took me five visits. The first day, they made me wait two hours, then it reduced. So the government has the money, it has resources. But ensuring that it reaches the right beneficiary is half the challenge.

The other half of the challenge is internal – a problem not only with UNICEF but all UN organizations, partly also because what used to be known as the developmental scenario is changing. These organizations are so used to thinking that if you don't have money, you can't do development work. To get out of that mindset is taking a lot of time.

The other thing is that UNICEF itself doesn't know what to do with a country like India. It is no longer a poor country. If you look at some of the human development indicators in Kerala or Maharashtra or Tamil Nadu, they are as good as Singapore or Thailand. On the other hand, you have Bihar, UP… What do you do with a country like India? There are 13 offices here. It is not a single-country programme. UNICEF is finding it difficult to define themselves. But we are chugging along, doing very good work.

Thank you very much.

Q&A

Questioner: Could tell us something about how UNICEF operates? What is the operating structure? How does it get its programmes going? How does it operate beyond the funds?

Abdul: UNICEF is very strongly supporting the CCE initiative in Rajasthan. But we also know that in Rajasthan, politically, now there is a climate for, let's say, a public examination in Class 8, and the government is promoting that. UNICEF has to work with the government. So how are you dealing with this? One, the fact that they are doing this programme, and then there is counter pressure from the government.

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Devika: I heard you say that CCE is very good if it is shared with parents. Is that what you said? CCE, to my mind, is a huge monster that is troubling many schools across the country. I work all over the country in schools ranging from State Board to IGCSE to Cambridge and ICSE and CBSE. And, to my mind, no one has understood CCE. CBSE has confounded the issue further because they themselves go and take training and try and tell teachers how to conduct CCE. So if you ask teachers all over the country, "What is CCE? What is formative assessment and what is summative assessment?" you get the answer that summative assessment is a pen-and-paper test whereas formative assessment is to be done in a variety of ways – which itself is wrongly understood. But that's what CBSE has propounded, and that is what everybody has understood it to be.

So how is UNICEF interpreting CCE? I would be interested to know that. Formative assessment is pedagogic. You enter the class, and formative assessment begins. And you could do it in any way you want. But then there

are a lot of things they have now said – this plus this, plus that, and so on. So what is UNICEF's understanding of CCE?

Aruna: I don't know UNICEF's understanding.

Devika: I mean, how are they going to conduct the CCE? What is the plan? It is continuous comprehensive assessment or evaluation which they say is scholastic and co-scholastic. What is this that needs to be measured and quantified in co-scholastic areas? Is it something which doesn't have an academic theory, or is it something beyond that? Are we also going to be looking at children and, as they develop, their intellectual development, the

habits of their mind and so on? Has there been some thought on that?

Jim: You gave the list of various points of entry – types of programmes like child protection documentation. Just so you can express your personal judgement after so many years, what are two or three things that you would really like to contribute to improve the quality of education or whatever else, among these many things? It is just a judgement – you are not to justify it.

Aruna: In each state, we make a work plan with the particular department – the Directors and Joint Directors. Then it is given to the Secretary of the state. In education, it is slightly easier, because whatever goes into the SSA and RMSA (Rashtriya Madhyamik Shikha Abhiyan) work plan is also reflected in UNICEF's. So most of the states by now know for what the Government of India will not give money, and that usually that ends up in our work plan.

In some cases, particularly in states like Tamil Nadu, where the reach is practically 90 per cent – social protection as well as the reach of education is very high – we propose, for instance, certain things for the tribal areas. For example, this early intervention is something that I actually proposed to the Tamil Nadu government and it was taken up, and is being done with SSA help and the Chennai Corporation, along with UNICEF.

Once the plans are in place, the government approves it, reviews all the sectoral plans. We have about seven sectors. All of us meet the Secretaries, usually the Chief Secretary or the Education Secretary of the state. They review it, and notifications and so on are suggested. Accordingly, the India country office allocates funds to us. Usually, if we are able to spend the money as we plan – that is, 25-40 per cent in the first half of the year – then it becomes easier to get more money. But if we don't, and we spend it towards the end of the year, the next year's budget gets affected.

Funding does play a huge role in what activities are done in the state because it gives us leeway. What the government is not able to do, we are able to if we have the funds. But the actual workings and details of the plan also depend on the state office. Quite a lot of state offices are very pro-active with the government and do a lot of technical notes and events and so on. In some offices, you will see the Chief Minister coming to UNICEF functions. In other offices, a lot of the work is very critical and done with the government, very closely, but not in public.

One example is the caste problem. In Tamil Nadu, there is a huge caste issue and it is now coming into schools. How to address this is a big question for government as well as private schools. We are now talking to NGOs and the government and trying to see how to resolve it. This is one area where the technical aspect of equality could be advocated. Blood tests, for instance – you can donate blood for anybody, which proves that we are all equal, that kind of thing. We are planning pamphlets like that with RMSA and so on. But we don't publicize it, we do it very quietly. We spend a lot of time writing reports and attending meetings and so on, so it helps if you know the local situation.

To answer the CCE question... The problem now is that RTE says that at the end of Class 8, you have to give a certificate that this child has completed elementary education. We are trying to tell all the state governments that that certificate needs to be in consonance with child-friendliness dictated in the RTE. The problem with the RTE phrase 'child-friendly' is that it is not defined. Therefore each state is doing different things.

The second thing is that many of the states feel they have to show a pass percentage at some public exam. In Rajasthan and Bihar, for instance, if you do a covert study, about 50 per cent of the children who start Class 1 do not reach Class 10. So they want to show that at the end of Class 8 so many children have come, so many children have passed, and so on.

UNICEF can't do a PIL (Public Interest Litigation) – somebody else has to do it. The problem is RTE does not mention that there should not be any exam, it only says you have to give a certificate. Consultations are taking place with child rights NGOs. We are waiting for their advice and will probably follow it – but probably not make a statement about it in public.

NCF had brought out these assessment handbooks that had a lot of elements of the CCE but in a way that was very child-friendly. It actually enabled the teachers to look at their students. We did a pilot project with those in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Kerala went ahead and translated all these assessment handbooks in Malayalam, Arabic, and Tamil for Language, and then for all the other subjects, and were starting on a pilot for Upper Primary. A lot of the examples in the assessment handbooks were from the DPEP Kerala question papers, so Kerala felt very confident and wanted to implement it. Then, suddenly, RTE came and CCE was dictated. Even before NCERT could wake up to it, CBSE said this is the way CCE is to be done. And there was no clarity.

If you talk to the teachers, most of them have an idea of what the child is capable of. Unfortunately, now we are in a bureaucratic regimen where if the teacher thinks that the child knows A/B, she has to produce a format and prove that this child knows it and therefore can be ranked as 1st or 2nd or 3rd. That paperwork is killing.

The teachers do have an idea of how to do assessment that will actually help the child, not just academically. But unfortunately, because of CBSE's rush, there were no consultations. The assessment handbook, on the other hand, was tried out in several places. It went back and forth across the nation – two districts in every state. In every district, there were district-level consultations on it and amendments made. There was no such thing for CCE.

Devika: This is assessment for development. This is not assessment for certification.

Aruna: Yes, but that is what it has become. It is mandated in an Act, therefore it has to be done. There is no deadline for CCE in the Act, and yet they rushed it as if there was. In ten months, they published it. Every other day in 2010, we would get phone calls saying, "Did you see the CBSE website? Such-and-such a thing has come. When do we translate it?" There was that kind of manic urgency, and no discussion at all. Most of these terminologies don't even have an equivalent in many of the Indian languages. If you can't name them, how are you going to understand? How are you going to implement them?

Dhir: Aruna, I know your position. But we must acknowledge that UNICEF does not have a position on many things. CCE is one of them, assessments is another. Multilingual education, languages in education... there is no organizational stand on what is supported or what the stand is. That is a very complex situation. And in that case, we have to go by what the state government is saying and just support that.

Aruna: No. Also, UNESCO is supposed to be the technical agency for these things – we are supposed to be the field hands. And UNESCO, partly because of its own political situation in the global arena, is not able to come up with anything right now. There is a document from UNESCO which actually says that mother tongue education is the best thing for a child. That is what I have been circulating.

In Karnataka, when that legislation came, a writer called me and asked, "Is there any UN document?" and that is the document I sent. He is now going to do a petition for the government about how Kannada should be taught and so on. So there are documents. If we have a position, it should derive from UNESCO's technical note. But unfortunately, UNESCO has not been too useful. There have been a lot of problems for them after they recognized Palestine as a full-fledged country, so we have not been able to get anything from them on this.

Dhir is right. We usually don't take positions on many of these things. Recently, the one we took a position on was the Juvenile Justice Act – 18 years of age.

Prof. Jim Tharu's question... I would do the early childhood and an adolescent programme.

Thank you all.

Experiences and Perspectives of the Azim Premji Foundation

Anand Swaminathan

ANAND SWAMINATHAN works at the Azim Premji Foundation (APF) and manages APF's Field Institutes operating in 6 states. He has formerly worked at Wipro's Eco Energy division and was also a part of Wipro Applying Thought in Schools, Wipro's social initiative in Education. Prior to this, he worked as a management professional in the corporate sector.

Anand Swaminathan: Many of you are fairly familiar with Azim Premji Foundation. So a brief recap. We are 15 years old. For the first ten years or so, we dabbled in various kinds of programmes around assessment, technology, etc. Around 2008-2009, we began to rethink the ways in which we engaged with the public system. And a lot of what I am going to describe now is what we have done over the past five or six years.

The Foundation itself has two operating units. There is the Azim Premji University, which works on various aspects of human development. So we have postgraduate programmes in Education, Development, and recently, Public Policy and Governance. We are also beginning a Liberal Arts undergraduate programme offering a Bachelor's in Science and Arts from the current year.

Then there is the Field Organization, which actually works on the ground with issues of school reform. What I am going to talk about now is our experience with the Field Organization because that is the relevant piece for this Forum. I will begin with some of the assumptions that guide our work and thinking around how we should approach engagement with the public system.

The first is that we think, at its very core, education is a process that unfolds between the teacher and the child. It is a fairly complex process, and requires a very high level – and a very specific kind – of competence in the teacher to be able to do that well. Therefore, if any process of reform in education doesn't, in some direct way, address that core issue, we don't think the possibility of reform will exist. That is one of our starting assumptions.

Another is that – this might sound obvious to some of you and not so to others – we feel India needs a fairly robust public education system. I am saying this because there has been a lot of debate today around the rampant privatization of school

education you see in India. And there are varying positions, and extreme positions, around it. Ours is this: we think that whatever our views on private schools, India definitely needs a strong, robust, working, equitable public education system.

To clarify – these assumptions aren't exhaustive. They are only illustrative, to give you a sense of the way we think in our organization.

We also think that any reform project in the public education system, given the scale, complexity, history and legacy of the system, will necessarily be complex. It will unfold over long periods of time. There are no quick fixes. Another assumption, which not many of you may agree with, is that scale in reform effort is as important as quality and intensity. Often you have this notion that small is beautiful. We think that, given the challenges the public system faces today, any attempts to try and do something about this have to also have significant scale; and it should have quality and intensity. Both have to go hand in hand. You see some organizations that do small, very high quality and intense work. You see some that do work on a significant scale, but not with too much depth. We think both need to go hand in hand.

Another one of our assumptions is that any reform effort – this 'teaching-learning process' – has to directly address school issues that we see in the public education system today. An example. The teacher is central to the process of education. However, by and large, we feel that teachers are inadequately developed for the complexities of the road they face in everyday government school classrooms.

Many government institutions and systems – like a DIET (District Institute of Education and Training), or the academic support system in the government like the SCERT (State Council of Educational Research and Training), the Block and the Cluster Resource Centres – rarely work to fulfil their own stated purposes. For example, one of their stated purposes is that they are supposed to scaffold the teacher academically. They rarely do that.

The teacher being inadequately developed is a core issue. You see this issue of competence not just in the teacher but in many of the stakeholders, school leaders, teacher educators and administrative functionaries. And there is no system in the government for their development, though there is some kind of system for developing teachers, both before they become teachers and when they are practising teachers.

The other kind of issue in the system is that schools are

reasonably insular. They have very little engagement with the communities they are situated in.

So these are illustrative examples of core issues, to give you a sense of what we think. They aren't exhaustive. But these are the kind of things that any civil society effort in public education reform has to grapple with. It is insufficient to do things that are peripheral to these.

The field organization of the Foundation is very complex. I'll talk to you about our basic unit, the District Institute, and hopefully, depending on the questions, the other parts of the organization will become clearer.

The District Institute exists to work towards improving the government schools in the district in which it is situated. Not just a bunch of schools – its mandate is to work for the reform of the entire district education system. That is our unit of engagement. It is an academic institution, in the sense that each District Institute has 50-60 resource persons in areas such as child development, maths education, educational research... And it is an institution in the sense that it doesn't do programmes. We want to create an identity for the District Institute that is local, and that it is sustained and will be there for long periods of time. An institution based in the district and working for efforts in the district – that is how we think of the Institute.

There are many other aspects to a District Institute. For example, in many of the older, more mature ones, we also run a demonstration school. The school is both for us to understand and to personally demonstrate to others what is possible academically – educationally – within more or less the same constraints as a government school. So we have children who come from similar backgrounds, and teachers from similar backgrounds. We follow the state curriculum and work within similar economics as the government school system. However, we do other things differently – like the processes of in-school teacher development, and the way in which we interpret the state curriculum. We do this also because very often people tell us that our ideas are very nice, but esoteric. And this is the way in which we are able to understand if it is really so or not.

Districts are fairly large units, and since our work involves working closely with large numbers of teachers and others, we also have centres in different blocks of the district. What we do is build capacities of teachers, school leaders, block and cluster resource persons, faculty in the DIETs – key stakeholders in

the education system – through several routes. For example, we worked on peer learning communities with what we call voluntary forums, where people congregate at their own time and expense to talk to and learn from each other about challenges they are facing, broader ideas in education. So we run voluntary forums and subject workshops, and conduct exposure visits to other places that are doing good work, professional seminars of teachers, etc. All of this is voluntary. Nobody joins these processes from the government system because it is mandated with poor people. It happens because people feel it is meaningful to engage with us.

We also work to strengthen – and hopefully change – government mechanisms. For example, with regard to the in-service system that exists today for teachers at the district level, we help the government identify and develop a fairly consistent resource group from among good teachers in the system. We also offer direct resource support. We encourage the government to create new platforms for teacher development – for instance, converting cluster meetings into a larger platform for teachers rather than just an administrative event.

So there are ways in which we work directly to strengthen government systems and processes. There is this partly-true partly-untrue narrative around the mediocrity of the public system; we try and build a positive narrative around public education because, like in any large system, there are a large number of people doing fairly good work. We do this in the larger community in the district, trying to build both an alternative to the current mainstream narrative to the public schools, and also our ideas about education. We do this in the media space. We do this through plays, melas (fairs) in schools, lectures and so on to engage the larger community, because as an organization there is only so much that 50-60 people can do.

This is a rough idea of the kind of work that we do in a district. The idea is that if we keep doing this for long years, hopefully over a period of one or two decades, things will begin to change.

Just two examples of things we don't do. We don't work school by school – for two reasons. One is that we have seen from past experience that school based developmental efforts just sap you and are very difficult to scale. Two, it is difficult also for the government to do any of it at the level of the full system. Another example, of a very different kind, is that we are not that much into the technology of education, which everybody is very keen on. In that sense, we are fairly old-world in our understanding of what the core issues are and what needs to be done.

Scale is important for us within a district, of course, as I narrated. It is also important in the number of districts and states we work in. In any state we are in, we work in roughly 20-30 per cent of the districts there. And these District Institutes are clustered around the more underdeveloped pockets. For example, in Karnataka, most are in northeastern Karnataka – the Hyderabad-Karnataka region which has Gulbarga, Yadgir, Bidar and Koppal; the southwest of Rajasthan, and those kinds of areas.

We are currently working in six states, and in each state capital we have a State Institute. This is somewhat similar, in the sense that it works on things like school curriculum, teacher education curriculum (both pre-service and in-service), and capacity building workshops for District Education Officers (DEOs) and Principals of DIETs. It also does design work with the in-service system – how to think of a more decentralized mode of in-service in the state. But of course, in some ways both the nature and the challenges of working at the state level are very different from a district.

I am now going to spend some time on reflections based on our work. Some of these are from the last 15 years, and some from the last four or five years.

The first is this: government schools work. I am saying this because a large number of people think they don't. We have seen they do, district after district. What I mean is, teachers come, students come, and some teaching happens. There will, of course, like in any large system, be a portion where this is not true. But by and large, the government system works.

However, despite this, many students are not learning. There are other issues but we think that the core issue is pedagogy. The teacher today does not know what it will take for every child in a class to be learning. This is not to say that the teacher's incompetence is her fault. How the school is managed, the culture in the school, the way it engages with the community, the kind of socio-economic backgrounds that students come from – all of these have a bearing. But we think the core issue in this is pedagogy. I am situating this within the larger point that government schools work.

Two: again contrary to the mainstream idea that people don't care, we think that a large number of teachers and others are genuinely concerned about this. I can back this because across the districts we work in – in Puducherry, Uttarkashi – we find that close to 25 per cent of teachers/head-teachers/

functionaries voluntarily give their time to engage with us in our processes. This is their personal time, beyond school hours, on holidays and weekends. They come to our centres and spend multiple hours a day engaged in processes that are largely what one can call academic, to promote their development. Twenty-five per cent is not a small number. And they do it voluntarily – we have no mandate necessarily to do this kind of work. So we think that there is a genuine concern in the system about the fact that children are not learning.

I also have some comments on the larger public system, which is that, again at the district level, you see significant disconnectedness. This is because of the structure. You have the department or the administrative structure, the structure of the SSA (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan), the academic structure of the DIET, and they don't talk to each other very often. Then there are all these sudden initiatives – ABL (Activity Based Learning), new textbooks, CCE (Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation), that kind of thing. So the system is always disconnected in trying to respond to the initiatives of different people.

The other thing we have seen is that the government doesn't know how to operate a decentralized educational system. The government is a fairly big bureaucracy – the entire bureaucratic system, starting with the school and going up to the secretary and the minister. But it doesn't know how to work in a decentralized manner. Now, what has happened in the past couple of decades is that as access has increased, a large number of schools have cropped up in almost every village. Many of them are single-teacher/two-teacher schools. This has multiplied the problem because a lot of the energy of the system goes into making the bureaucracy work.

The counter to this is: therefore you have the school, which is at the fag end of the bureaucratic chain. And if the notion of the bureaucracy is at the final node, it is a mechanistic entity, and you have to expect the school and the classroom to have creative agency. So there is a disconnect. This is just an example of something we've seen. It doesn't mean that we have any answer to this issue.

The fair point in this is that we have seen that on the ground there is always space for constructive civil society engagement. Across districts – now we have MOUs with many states, but for many years we didn't – when you work with teachers, school leaders and functionaries, if your engagement is constructive, not so much activist and watchdog-ish, there is always space for you to work. People are welcoming in the public system. But this reduces

as you go up the system, from the school to the district, to the state.

The fifth thing I want to say is that as an organization in the field that works extensively, we feel very hopeful. We don't carry the view that this is a failing system, which can't be turned around. Our daily experiences belie this. Our daily experience is of a system that works at a certain level and is interested in doing something about it. So contrary to other views, we are very comfortable with our experience.

Lastly, we are very concerned about the proliferation of private schools. This is not to suggest that private schools are not on. This is a complex nation and all kinds of schooling systems are fine. But it is not clear why this shifting trend from government to private schooling is happening. It really is not because the quality of schooling in a private school is better. But in the last seven years, there has been a ten percentage shift of students from government to private schools. What this number hides is that in many states, it is already equal. In Uttarakhand, where we work, there are as many children in private as in public schools, and in ten years from now, it will just turn over. We are fairly concerned about this because it has direct implications on issues of equity.

So I am done. The idea was to briefly describe our work and our reflections. The conversation will guide where this goes.

Q&A

Vasavi: I was wondering if we should look more closely at how the state in India defines public systems, because we are using it in a very generalized way. Has some thought been given to this?

Vishnu: You spoke about having a different in-service training approach. I want to understand a little bit more about what this approach is, and how you see it as different from the state's approach.

Ankur: This is more of a clarification for me. When you were describing the District Institutes, I was wondering what makes them institutes and not just field or regular branch offices. I understand that there are experts there and some of these activities that you were describing. But is there an effort to engage with the larger idea of a training/research institute which is, in the larger sense, what we would call an institute?

One of the issues that, for instance, we found was – and it was repeated several times – that even in a bureaucracy, it is not as if the bureaucracy itself is informed about what needs to be done. So in our own work, we found that the DEO (District Education Officer) may have got a circular of some sort, but the communication was never transmitted below that. And so there are a whole host of communication issues that remain unresolved. Is there engagement with that? I want to go back to the Mahila Samakhya, in some sense… How do you get the community involved? I understand that 25 per cent of the teachers are engaged. How do you get the local community to take ownership of an institute of this kind? Can you make these institutes more participatory in nature? And if we try to move in that direction, how do you tackle this issue of whose agenda you want to pursue? How much is it an agenda that comes externally because there is a central actor, in the end, which is driving it? And how organic can you let the agendas be?

Ramkumar: Post-DPEP (District Primary Education Programme), there has been an erosion of academic institutions, be it state level or DIET. APF seems to think in terms of the institutional approach to education – creating the state and district institutes at the field level. Does this institutional approach strengthen the state institution or weaken it? Are we creating a parallel system where our energy and efforts go into running our own institutions, thereby weakening the existing trend of the state institutions? What is the plan to strengthen them?

Anjali: Continuing in that strain – that there is a public system, which has schools, District Institutes, SCERTs and so on, that kind of a structure – from what you presented and what we know about it, at all these levels, APF also has its structure and is working with the same school system. So, one: if you could give an idea as to what these District Institutes are. You mentioned something about State Institutes doing some leadership training and so on…

Anand: No, I didn't.

Anjali: You mentioned in passing some work you do with the state, with teachers, some in-service trainings and so on…

Anand: I didn't say leadership training.

Anjali: Sorry – whatever – with head teachers and the system. So what is the work of a District Institute? Typically, how many people would there be in it or in a State Institute? What is the kind of work they would be doing on a daily basis? You said you have MoUs in six states. What is the kind of work that the MoU outlines? Is it broad, or does it specifically outline that in this Annual Plan, APF will be doing this kind of work?

Then you mentioned the voluntary engagement of the teachers – 25 or 30 per cent of the teachers do come. What is the frequency and type of this engagement? How do you do this? And if you work with schools directly in a district, how many schools do you work with? Typically, how do you select those schools? Do you select the most difficult ones? What is the objective of selecting those schools? What do you do with them? That will give a better idea as to what APF is actually doing.

Arvind: I think we need to examine the model – it is stuck somewhere. Let me try to put down what I think, because these are issues on which I have a fair amount of information though I may not know the exact details.

One, that there is no mandated autonomous sort of plan for district education. So if you have a District Institute to help the public system but there is no mandated function there, the only mandate that resembles your aspirations is what was given for the DIETs in the initial years. If you look at the original DIET document, that is the mandate you would actually want. See, you can't be an alternative DIET because that needs an alternative structure. But if it is to help a DIET, the DIETs today are in a very different position. You really can't get into that – they are so understaffed.

So one, there is more space the state is actually mandating at the district level, which you think you could work with to enhance. That is something to examine. Second, there are only two possibilities: either you work directly with schools, or you work on a mobilization angle. If you work on a mobilization angle, you set up committees, you work with villages, you work on issues of education, raising consciousness and doing the PSM People Science Movement) kind of activities that we have been talking about – which is partly what you are doing with teachers. But that is a whole range of extensions where you obviously also get into both cooperative and conflict positions. If you can't get into any conflict positions, then the mobilization positions are

ruled out. We too used to face that kind of a crisis – sometimes do the mobilization and sometimes draw back. So there is a bit of a situation there. If you can't do mobilization across communities, then I think the only space left is to work directly with schools, which you are ruling out for scale.

So what I am saying is that the ground realities don't allow your assumptions to be effective in that model. The assumptions are theoretically very nice – that we should all have quality education and it should be something to scale. Hardy was talking about micro to macro. We may have a different position, that micro to macro is an aspiration. Thirty years down the line we, whether we took this route or that route, we have still retained that aspiration. But what I am trying to say is that the ground realities do not allow those things to function in operational issues, maybe.

Jim: This is a question at a different plane. Obviously, the main concern is about the organizational structures, which I think are central. I'll just go back to when you started and you said that maybe you have a vision of pedagogy – the relations between the teacher and the child. And you also said that schools in the public system do work – teachers are there.

I just want to get you back there, and your vision of what is there to build on and where you are going. The middle C of CCE – does it have a larger place now than it had in all our imaginations ten years ago, in the sense of the holistic development of the child? Or are you implicitly saying that the next round of assessment surveys on Maths and Language in the next ASER survey, again will show up in those narrow indicators. I am just asking: is your vision influenced by this?

I am asking this because you are working with people from those communities, whom you have trained as resource persons and experts at APF, at Azim Premji University and so on. And therefore their vision, if they are participating, will be somewhat different from what most of us middle class people feel is good education – that is, good mathematics, good skills, good lab and all that rubbish. Is that coming into your thinking? This is something you could answer right at the end if you have time, because it is cutting away from the other questions.

Anwar: I want to add to what Ankur and Arvind said in different ways, and a little more. You said that obviously the whole education system is very complex. It consists of a whole lot of parts. And the impression one gets – also from your talk – is that since you

are working at the national level, the idea is to affect the whole education system of the country, so that the effect comes down to the school level, which is the public education system.

Very broadly speaking, there are three major parts: the schools as units; then the whole system which supports the schools, which is the administration, right up to the policy making part that looks after the schools; and then you have the culture and society in which all the schools function, which also play an important role in how the schools shape up, whether they are able to deliver or not, whether they are accepted, what is desired of them, etc. In such a complex system, when you give them a lot of inputs, it is not the inputs of each system that ultimately matter – because very often you might have very good teacher training, but you may not have teachers performing. Ultimately, the crux of the matter also is how things come together in the system rather than how individual components of the system function.

So, as civil society organizations, we go into a situation on a small scale. We try and understand the situation. If you are really trying to deliver, you don't stop at something. You might find, in a real situation, things happening or not happening at levels that you did not expect. But you have to think on your feet and solve them.

However, that is not what your mandate seems to be. Ultimately, if you are making a system function, it seems that you will have to fill in the missing links wherever and however they come. I don't know whether it is to some extent building on the issue of activism or community work or whatever, but it is there. Whatever is missing has to come in. The system has to function. As we have been discussing, the government seems to be functioning from some level, but there are lots of things missing. The government doesn't seem to know what is happening. So are we stepping into it, or what?

Deepika: Mine is not a very well formulated question, but just a few thoughts. Yesterday we heard about the Mahila Samakhya programme and the People's Science Movement, where they grew from a policy statement that women/adult literacy was important to question discrimination, or to develop scientific temper. And then, it was while engaging with the community – with the women themselves – and by working with the community that they actually developed the programme contents in terms of the material, the primers and everything that was

being done in the community. So though they derived their vision from a policy statement, the content of the programme was largely co-constructed with people with whom they were working or they wanted to impact. However, the other programmes – be it ABL or the Foundation – took from a particular school and tried to implement those.

So my question is: Where does one derive the vision from? Again, how important is it for systems as big as UNICEF or, for that matter, the Foundation, which are working at the national level, to align with the kind of vision a state would have?

I am talking specifically about the vision the state has for the educated person, the vision of what it thinks the educated person is, especially when we know that 70-75 per cent of tribal girls drop out before they finish secondary education. Report after report shows that girls are not finding education relevant, that is why there is this dropout. Tribals are not finding it relevant, and that is why there is such huge dropout. So if those are the kind of reasons, and the state has a particular vision with which it is running schools and content and pedagogy in a particular way, how do such huge organizations then align or not align with the vision? Where do they derive their vision and mandate from? And whose vision of education are they actually taking forward in the schools they are working with?

Devika: This is clearly focused on your presentation, not talking about larger issues. You said three things. You said that the issue seems to be with pedagogy. You said that you deal with that with in-service training. And you also said that you would rather not work with individual schools.

Therefore my question is this: how will you really ensure a continuous capability in teacher performance? The link of in-service training and building capacity in teachers also needs to follow up with observations and developing them in an on-going way, and creating a motivating environment for work in the school, for example. So if you are hands-off from schools and if you only want to do in-service training, are you even looking at, for example, a classroom curriculum design for 40 minutes? What kind of a design is s/he really making to enter and to make sure that s/he addresses all the three aspects of the teaching-learning cycle? The what, how, and whether – is that being looked at?

And after doing the in-service training, what is the mechanism in place to make sure that day after day, s/he continues to remain capable on the job and continues to remain motivated to deliver and

to develop self-efficacy? How would you do that if you are not engaging with schools?

Anand: There are broadly three kinds of frames from where the questions seem to have come: clarificatory, fundamental questions that arose out of what I said, and a sense of concern about the organization of the scale and its work in the public system. I am going to respond matter-of-factly.

Vasavi asked about the state's definition of the public system. There is no clear answer to this. Many people think that the government school is, in its entirety, the public education system. Anything which is not a government school is not a part of the public system. We also see that when we work with, for example, Block and District Education Officers, very often they think of private schools as also being part of the system that they monitor and manage. So in practice, we usually see both kinds – one, that the public system is essentially the government schools, and two, that private schools are also within the public system because they are in some sense regulated and monitored. An example is what has been happening in Bangalore in the last year or so. There have been several reports about the abuse of children in private schools, which has made the local heads of districts and Block Education Officers more active in inspecting and regulating the private schools. There is a third notion around the fact that there are other ways in which the idea of 'public' enters the private school, which is through curriculum and other such things.

Vishnu, you asked about in-service. I will try and outline what I think is a good system for teacher in-service. One, it has to work for different modes. For example, a very important aspect of in-service is the kind of in-school processes there are for teacher development. These could be mentoring by a senior teacher when a new teacher joins the school, a peer learning process when teachers sit together every day or once in a week to discuss aspects of the school or specific children – or any such learning process.

Then there are out-of-school processes, like creating a peer learning community. We think teaching is a fairly complex profession requiring a lot of expertise, and therefore there is a need for teachers to engage with each other outside school as well. Also teacher seminars – if you think of the teacher as someone who is reflecting on her work, learning from her work

and finally presenting her findings and research to a larger platform of peers.

Also, workshops by experts around issues like child development, the nature of science, the nature and content of different subjects, pedagogic aspects –all of these have to form a rich, complex system that is available for a teacher to develop herself. It works as a system where the energy is coming from the teacher, because she is the one who wants to develop herself and there are opportunities available. And she determines, therefore, what her journey is, along with, or in consultation with, her leader in the school.

This is clearly not the kind of in-service system that exists today. There are a certain number of days that are budgeted in the SSA – it used to be 20 days, but the number is reducing – when a few people in the SCERT would sit together and decide what the curriculum for the in-service should be, such as five days' training for CCE, five days for textbooks, five days' for something else. Then there is a process of cascading these models down to master trainers and local level trainers, and finally down to the school. By the time it reaches the teacher, it has often lost relevance or expertise. And today, in most places we work in, in-service is not seen as useful.

The issue is that for the kind of system that I am describing, it is very difficult for the state today to be able to do that. So we try and help in a few ways. For example, can we create a consistent resource group within the district of practising teachers who do good work, and work with them for long periods of time? So when you do cascade, you are using more competent people. Two, although the curriculum is decided at the state level, can it be somewhat more connected with the kinds of things we are seeing on the ground? Because there are new state initiatives around this or that. How can such a curriculum be created? Is it possible to at least create menu options within the existing system?

These are small means which we think of with which we can try and work within the existing system. At the same time, we try and see how it is possible for the system to now become slightly more decentralized. But for that decentralization to happen – what Ramkumar was saying – unless the DIETs become stronger, it is very difficult. What do you decentralize to? Those are the challenges. But these are the things we are thinking about.

Ankur's question was slightly more complex. To begin with the first one – why an institute and not a field office? For a few reasons, the first of which I mentioned. We think that you have to be situated

in the place where you are trying to do something. Truly situated – not just a field office that is fulfilling a programme outlined somewhere else. We work with the system and the community in a district and therefore have to be in some sense local, dealing with issues there, so we think in an institutional mode. When I say 'institutional', I mean that you are part local, and there for long periods of time – an institution in that simplistic sort of notion.

Each District Institute makes its own annual plan. We work within a block framework. So we have a broad kind of an approach in the field of how we will work. Within that, we define what we want to do over a five-year horizon and what we will do in the coming year – a rolling five-year kind of thing. All our people in the districts are divided into blocks, and each block makes its own plan of engagement that becomes a district plan. It then becomes an integrated state plan combining the work we do in the State Institute.

So there is a significant aspect of decentralization within a framework of approach and principles of work. It is not strictly an academic institution that just sits and offers some courses and does some research. It does those things. It does do research. For example, we are trying to do a collaborative pan-field research around ways of teacher development that seem to work or not – what shades and nuances you might want to give it. We offer residential workshops – for example, an integrated summer workshop around perspectives and subjects. So we get a group of 300 teachers and do some foundational work with them around Philosophy, Psychology, Sociology and so on. We also do subject specific workshops around them.

So in that sense, it is an academic institute. But in many ways it is not, because that is not why it exists. It exists because some day, people will find that it wants to somehow contribute to the process of reforming the public system. And therefore you end up doing much more than what Anwar was outlining because there are always things to grapple with.

Take an extreme example. Uttarkashi is a district which saw important natural disasters within a space of ten months in 2012-13. Everything went out of gear. And for us to say we would do teacher training would have been a joke. So for a significant period of time, we stopped doing what we were doing and got into rehabilitation work. That is not the norm but an exception. But when you are situated in a place and exist for it, it means that

you will be far more flexible in what you are there for than if you were an academic institution.

Anwar was saying something about community. Did you mean participation of the community in the work of our institute?

Anwar: I was saying, locally, how do you develop ownership?

Anand: It is not very clear right now because all said and done we have been working in this mode only for the past four or five years. It takes time to dialogue with communities in a way that they become more and more engaged and interested in your work. We do have fairly intense dialogues with teachers and District Education Officers around what we do, not so far with the larger community. That will take time because the district is a very large place – it's easier in a village.

Ramkumar asked if the APF institutional structure strengthens or weakens the government structure. Our structure itself does neither – it has no reason to weaken or strengthen what already exists. What the structure does is what is important.

A significant component of our work in the district is to help strengthen the DIET. For example, Yadgir is a new district in northeastern Karnataka. It was created after it got hived off from Gulbarga which is seen as a backward district. In Yadgir, when we began work, there was no DIET. So a lot of initial support we gave the government was as if we were the DIET, because we wanted to do in-service work and they didn't have a resource group so they were pulling in our people for that.

What we did initially was to try and convince the government that they needed to set up the DIETs in the new districts that they had created – Yadgir was not an exception, there were a few others. So we got the DIETs set up. It was difficult for us to get the DIETs staffed because in Karnataka, moving to a DIET is seen as a punishment posting. Initially, we got a principal. She was very unhappy. The DIET Principal in Karnataka is called DDPI-Deputy Director of Public Instruction) Academic and the DEO is called DDPI Administrative. She wanted to be the DDPI Administrative! Slowly and continuously, we have been working with the DIET and with the state level department to try and see how to get this DIET fully staffed and get it active and working. Now that the DIET in Yadgir is up, we have to strengthen it to do many of the things it is supposed to do, because the people who have been appointed as faculty don't necessarily come with any experience of teacher education or

research or any of the things that the DIET mandates.

That is the way it has unfolded. It is a question of what you do when you are there. Our structure itself doesn't, in any way, strengthen or weaken the government system.

To clarify Anjali's questions... We currently work in 45 districts, and not all of them have a full fledged Institute – only in 13 of the older set of districts. Many of the others are beginning in a small way. So what I was talking about was just an illustration of an older district, which typically has 50-60 people. Of these, a large bunch – say 40-odd – could have three or four people who are Maths educators. There could be five-six who are in Social Science, similarly five-six in Science – that kind of thing. Now we also have people whom we are developing in Child Development and Philosophy of Education and Sociology Education. That makes up a big chunk.

Another big chunk in the district is the folks we call Block Resource Persons. In each block of the district, we have a small centre with a couple of people working there. Now, everybody who works in a District Institute has two responsibilities. One is a domain responsibility. So as a Maths education person, you go deeper and deeper. Two, you also have a stakeholder or geographic responsibility, which is building the engagement with teachers, school leaders and functionaries in the block. Both go hand in hand. Some of our academic folk do a lot more of academic work, but also a significant amount of relationship building with stakeholders. There are some whose responsibility is largely to build relationships and also do some academic work. So there is a balance. A smaller district might have six-eight block people, in a larger district there may be 17. Then we have a lot of support staff in each district – an accountant, a librarian, an IT person, some to handle administration.

In some of our older districts, we have also set up our own schools. These are meant to be K-12 schools. They are similar to government schools in many respects. If you have a K-12 school, you have teachers. In some places, like in Karnataka, when you begin a school, you begin only with Grade 1, and the next year you go to Grade 2, and the next year you go to Grade 3 and so on. Our school in Yadgir has now moved into Grade 4. But in some other states, you could begin a full primary school and slowly expand to elementary. Some of our older schools are beginning Grade 8 now. So we have schools, and teachers in the schools, and a school principal. That is what a mature District Institute looks like.

Not every District Institute will become like this. So for example, we have the largest District Institute in Gulbarga. In Bidar – which is a very small adjoining district – we are going to have a smaller core group, taking significant support from Gulbarga. So that is the operational structure.

A quarter of the time of anybody who is in an academic role in our Institute goes into their own development. We have a capacity development process that runs in the organization. This process is of different kinds. There are foundational workshops that anybody who joins would go through. Then you have subject specific capacity building workshops. And then we do something called the co-development process, which is a peer learning process. When we began this, back in 2010, we had one Maths person in Chattisgarh and two Maths people in Rajasthan – you can't do much with them. This co-development group, across the country, would sit together and figure out our views on Maths education, how we could work with teachers. These groups are fairly large, with 30-50 people in each subject group, and we have multiple subject groups across the country. They spend a lot of time thinking how to work with teachers, what kind of workshops we can offer, how we can support a specific government process, etc.

Another significant portion of their time goes in engaging with teachers and whoever they can engage with. Take two extremes. You might do a three-hour session around early numeracy in one of our block centres within a voluntary teachers' forum. The forum would have said, "These are some aspects that we need some help on. Can you give us help?" Then this Maths group in the district would go and do half or full day session with them. The other extreme is that they would offer a five-day residential Maths workshop for middle school teachers. There is a series of things in between.

Also, a significant portion of the time goes into in-service support. In the summer, when the government in-service is fairly active, many of the people are resource persons there. So that would be another significant proportion of time – say half their time.

The last 25 per cent might go into going into the school. Somebody asked a question about this. When I said we don't work school by school, what I meant is that our approach is not whole-school development. It is to enable an individual in a particular role – for example, the teacher. So we may go into the school but not because we want to develop the entire school – we want to support the teacher.

The question about the MoU... We don't do specific MoUs any

more because we think it doesn't help. They are broad MoUs that say that both of us would like the system to improve, and these are the broad areas in which we could work together. The specifics we will determine in conversation. It is partly a reflection of the credibility we have built and partly a maturation in the government MoU process that these are possible today.

The 25 per cent voluntary engagement – what is the frequency and type? It is of broadly two types. There is a group that emerges as a high intensity group, meaning that this is a group that we interact with six times a year, and through at least 12 days of engagement. That is one kind of group, and eight-ten per cent of the 25 would be in that group. Another 15-18 per cent would be less intense. We would be engaging with them three-six times a year, and possibly between 6 and 12 days of engagement in a year. The numbers are only to clarify. That is not how we think and work.

I'll also answer the question about working with schools. We don't work with schools directly, in the manner that I described. It would actually be visiting the teacher in her workplace, which happens to be the school. These teachers, who engage with us intensely, might ask us to come to their classrooms and do something with them. So the place of engagement shifts sometimes to the classroom – our engagement is not school based.

I don't agree with Arvind when he says that this space exists on paper, but not on the ground because the space can be only one of these two types – mobilization or school based. Our practice does not necessarily show that. There are ways in which you can engage on the ground which don't necessarily fall into these groups. For example, there is no mandate for a District Autonomous Plan- that's not true. There is an Annual Work Plan made at the district level that goes to the state for approval. This is done in a fairly mechanized way in the district – you take last year's plan and make some changes. But the process of the Annual Work Plan has the possibility of what we can actually do around it on the ground, which is what we try to do when we work with the DEO.

Jim, I will tell you what our notion of education is and what we think it can do for the child. That is where a lot of what we think comes from. We think that it is a process of the child engaging with this enormity that human knowledge is, and beginning to understand that. That process of engagement is as

vast as human knowledge. It also needs to happen in a way in which the child begins to understand herself better – her ethical system, her value system, her place in society, and her engagement with the society in which this knowledge exists. Therefore, is it important that the child learn Mathematics? Absolutely. Is it important that the child also develops ethically? That is very important too. This is a caricature, but that's the way we think about the process which is far removed from the reality of classrooms today, for sure.

I have partly already responded to Anwar. He was asking, where is the community? There are different aspects to a system, you know. There is the school, there is the system, there is the policy, there is the community. Very often, just because you work with the teacher it doesn't mean that it converts into something similar in the classroom – because it is complex. And how do you respond to that complexity? There is something that offers flexibility for us to respond to it and also something that limits it.

What offers the flexibility is that we are there. Our people are a part of the local social ethos because they are connected with the system on an everyday basis. Therefore what happens within the frame of the system starts affecting us directly and we respond to it in many, many ways. The limits to it are our larger framework – our approach to working with the public system. There are things that an organization can and can't do. But within this frame, there are ways in which it expresses itself.

In practice, it is very difficult to be black-and-white about this. The District Institute exists to work with the public system and try and reform it – that doesn't change. Within that, some of the choices and assumptions we have made – I don't think they are going to change. Our centrality of the teacher is something that we think is just there. It is our understanding and it is not going to change.

For example, you might realize that in working with teachers, a certain kind of mode doesn't work, and you might do something else. There may be a group in a district that thinks that this kind of intense academic work has no effect. What you need to do is to work more on the teacher's idea of the child and somehow make the teacher more familiar with the child because the teacher is fairly disconnected and removed from the realities of the child. She comes from a very different social/cultural milieu in government schools today. So they'll say we need to work on that. That kind of thing does happen within this larger framework.

To Deepika's question, a brief response. The commonality of vision that the Foundation has with the state government is the

Constitution. Whatever is within the notions of society that the Constitution outlines, is the space in which we engage together. There are times when this is not always true. But even within this, there are significant areas of overlap and common concerns. That is what ties us. But our vision comes from many of the ideas of society that our Constitution outlines. Many of you might feel that that is being questioned – the notions of the Constitution are getting questioned in today's political circumstances. I am keeping that aside for the moment. For us, that is where it comes from.

Devika's question was about our approach to school. I responded to the question when I said we do go into the school. We don't go into the school because our approach to school is school-by-school. But we do go into it.

Experiences and Perspectives of Room to Read

Sourav Banerjee

SOURAV BANERJEE is Literacy Director at Room to Read. He has over fifteen years of experience in the elementary education sector, working for government, non-government and donor organizations. Before Room to Read, he has worked with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) where he led conceptualizing, designing, managing and monitoring of education and skill development program activities.

Sourav Banerjee: Room to Read as an organization is about ten years old now, and most of what I will be talking about today is our experience and learning from working in the field. Ours is an evolving organization, so we have been able to quickly take what we have learnt and plough it back into the programme. In fact, we started speaking to stakeholders about our programme only recently because we were still trying to figure out what works in the field and what doesn't. We believe that unless we ourselves know it well, it would not be fair to preach to others about doing things in a particular way.

Room to Read is very evidence based – we try to generate evidence and work on that, and also look at international research that is going on. We work in the field of literacy. Many of you know that in the last ten years there has been a huge amount of international literature available on research in this field. We have tried to incorporate that to the best of our ability. Many a time, when you start quoting international research, the immediate reaction is that India is unique and you cannot really compare other research with this country. Yes, we understand that there are specific things unique to India, but a lot of international research does apply to our context as well.

Our tagline is 'World Change Starts with Educated Children'. It motivates us even today, across all the countries we work in. We envision quality education for all children, and work specifically in two areas – education for girls and literacy. That has been our focus for the past ten years, and what we believe we should stick to. So even when there have been requests for us to work with mathematics or EVS (environmental science) or other areas, we felt we were not competent for it.

In terms of the literacy challenge, everybody now knows the figures of 250 million Indian children not being able to read and write, and 42 per cent girls not completing secondary

education. As I said, we focus on two things that we think will make a difference to this situation. In terms of the broader theory of change, we work for literacy. We are there to help primary school children become independent readers, and work towards general equality in education. The objective is basically to see that girls complete their secondary education. In the process, we think there will be more educated children in the world, which would lead to more empowered, active and responsible citizens.

The literacy programme has three major components: reading and writing instruction, school libraries, and book publishing in a small way. In the girls' education programme we provide financial support to girls to complete their education, and give life skills support through workshops and training. Mentoring is a key component for life skills as well as academic support. We also work with communities and parents to keep the girls in school.

I will be talking more about the literacy programme because I look after the literacy portfolio in the organization. Also, that has more possibilities of scale-up. The girls' education programme is still very small, and we are trying to figure out key reflection points in it.

The general sense you get from anyone working in the field is that reading levels are low throughout all states. Our basic approach has been to see what is it that works to improve reading and literacy levels – reading and writing. As Anand also mentioned, we found pedagogy to be a key factor. Reading is not taught as a separate subject anyway. But even when language is taught, there is a pedagogical aspect to that. We experiment at the field level to see if we can make a difference there, and then work with the government to scale it up. For the past ten years we have been experimenting, and it is only now that we are getting some evidence of things improving, of what works. We would probably like to move on to working with the government to scale up our efforts. A part of my presentation will be to talk about the model, and the kind of evidence it is coming up with. The second part will be to share future plans in terms of scaling up.

We believe that in order to be independent leaders, children should have both the skill of reading – the actual nuts and bolts, the science and acquisition of reading – and also the habit of it. We have been noting that there have been various initiatives to work on the skill part of it, where children have been taught how to read and write. But then, since the skill was not followed up, children often regressed to their original positions after the NGO had moved out,

or when the programme stopped. Developing the habit of reading is very critical in order to sustain the skills children acquire.

Of course, there is the very significant role of the reading environment – at school, at home, or in society at large. We work with all three components of the programme. Skill is a small programme. We are trying it out currently only in two states – Rajasthan and Uttarakhand. The focus has been mainly Hindi based instruction, but we will probably go into other languages a couple of years down the line.

Fluency is important in our programme – to see that children read fluently and with comprehension. We work a lot on vocabulary building, which happens in the library as well as in the instruction programme. All the five aspects of reading which have now been accepted worldwide – phonological awareness, decoding, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension and writing – are built in. The instruction design is such that there are activities in all of these every day. It is not sequential. We do a bit of phonics, which includes letter-sound correlation, but also look at decoding in a more scientific manner because we have been finding that this is a problem area in many of the schools we work in. A detailed instruction routine is followed each day. We also provide supportive instruction materials, like data cards, student workbooks and such things.

Teacher training modules are standardized – we found that this was a good way of preventing dilution of the quality of teacher training as you cascade down. On-site demonstration and coaching is a key component. Our staff go into the field, and work with teachers to demonstrate the kind of instruction we talked about. This is a significant departure from a monitoring kind of approach where you go to a school and collect data on what is happening. Ours is a process, and our people are extensively trained in coaching skills. So it is through coaching the teacher that an attempt is made to bring about a behavioural change in the way instruction is imparted. There is also a tracking of students' performance, which is more formative in nature, and which the teacher does along with the student at every stage of the instruction.

This is broadly how the instruction programme is designed. We have been doing this for the last six-seven years, and have tried out various models. One of the good things about Room to Read is that we never hesitate to accept that something is not working, to junk it and try something new. We do base-line/mid-

line comparisons with controlled schools on a sample basis, and it is only the last three years' data that shows an improvement in the intervention schools compared to the controlled schools, evidence of our children actually learning. We usually follow the early grade reading assessment tools used the world over. So we look at fluency in letter reading, word decoding, passage reading and passage comprehension. In all these four parameters we are now seeing an improvement.

The habit forming part is mainly done through the school library programme. This is our oldest programme, what we started off with initially in India. It was only later that we realized that we had these beautiful libraries but children were not taking the benefit of these because they didn't even know how to read and write. That is how we got into the instruction programme.

The library programme has been our key programme from the beginning. It has evolved over time. Currently, we see it as complementing the instruction programme, a continuum of how a child develops reading skills after instruction, from pre-reading activities to developing phonological awareness and data sound knowledge, to getting to more advanced word decoding, automaticity, finally leading to independent reading.

We believe that in all the stages you need to have different sets of material available in the school to support these various stages of reading. At the pre-reading stage, it could be just illustrated books or those without any letters, moving to picture books and big books where you can do guided and shared reading activities, to more advanced readers and novels so children can do more independent reading. So we see to it that there is a broad variety in the genre and level of books available in the library.

In the library programmes, the objective is to develop the habit of reading, and we see that as having happened when the child begins to read voluntarily. That is a good indication, though what we measure are more proxy indicators like how many books are being checked out by the student. The way the books are selected is an extensive process. Once in three years, a committee sits for about 15 days reviewing all the literature published in the country in those three years. There is a set of criteria with developmental requirements such as number of words, number of sentences, and the kind of pictures. There is also an exhaustive checklist of social indicators – no gender bias, violence and so on. All these books are levelled according to the difficulty level of reading, and we do a similar levelling of the children in the classroom. So if I am a

beginner level reader, I should be reading books more at my level. This helps the teacher to guide children to the right books.

We also train the teachers in reading activities to develop interest in reading. Most children coming to government schools are first generation learners and many of them don't have any kind of print available at home. We lure them to print so they start reading. How do you read a story aloud to a child? How do you do shared reading? How do you do peer reading? How do you monitor independent reading? Teachers are trained in all of this.

In all libraries we try to ensure two things. One, that books are accessible to the child – physically, so that they can get books when they want to, and also be allowed to take them home. This is easier said than done, because in most government systems, as you know, the first reaction is that the books will get lost or something else might happen to them if students were to take them home. It usually takes about six-eight months to convince the teacher that it is okay if books are lost or torn, which usually doesn't happen anyway. The other thing is to ensure that every school has time for independent reading. Most often, we find that the school timetable has no space to allow the child to read. So what is the use of the library? There is a lot of negotiation that happens at the district level, and at the school level, to make sure that the school timetable accommodates a reading period.

Then there are other committee engagement activities that we try to do. As I said, environment building is also part of our design. So we try to raise awareness among parents about the importance of reading, allowing children time to read at home, and so on.

As an organization, we like to measure success. Two things we usually check are: library functionality – to see if books are there, and are displayed and maintained properly; and the number of books a child is checking out to read at home. We have seen improvement in these indicators over time. So hopefully, that is a good sign.

We support a library for a period of three years. The assumption is that within three years, the systems will be kind of institutionalized. At any point of time, we support around 2,500 libraries in a year, in the six states we work in. Mumbai and Delhi have high enrolment schools, with 400-500 children. But in some schools in Rajasthan, you might find 20 children in a school.

In order to develop a larger culture of reading – again, this is a long-term process, nothing happens immediately – we

work on the parents and the community to build awareness about the importance of reading. Simultaneously, we work with the government to see that policies are in place to support reading. Issues like having a reading period and adequate instruction time in the classroom are among things we constantly advocate.

Then there is the issue of developing children's literature and creating an atmosphere in which it is published. That is the most difficult part, I would say. It is kind of a vicious circle because if you go to the publishers, they say there is no demand for these books, so they don't publish them. But consumers say that books are not available. We are trying to break that by publishing some titles ourselves.

In terms of community engagement, we do a reading demonstration, usually at the school, where children are asked to read out to parents. It is usually held on Literacy Day or on Teachers' Day. We also try and form a kind of a Literacy Committee at the school level. If it is an existing committee, like the School Management Committee (SMC), we tell them to identify a few people among them who can assume a more active role in promoting literacy. If all such committees are defunct, we try and build a new committee. Our whole approach to committee engagement is to strengthen the school-community link, rather than intervening in the community ourselves, which is not sustainable in the long run.

In the libraries, we form a Child Management Committee. This has been a very effective step. A group of children are trained in library management aspects: How do you keep the books? How do you issue books to children? How do you ensure that the books are properly levelled? How do you ensure that the records are kept and registers are maintained? This is useful because in many cases, there are only two or three teachers in a school and it becomes an additional job for them to maintain library records. So it is helpful to do this with the students, and is also a sustainability measure because once we move out after three years, it is the students who continue with this activity. And of course, there are other benefits like leadership skills getting developed.

On the policy front, I think we are seeing some movement. The Right to Education (RTE) Act does talk about libraries, at least, though it doesn't still say what the library should be and what it should contain. The Padhe Bharat Badhe Bharat scheme, which the government has launched, talks about instruction time. It has been a major advocacy issue with us that in the early grades there is not adequate time available for instruction because often the school has

only two teachers and their entire focus is on Grades 3-4-5. But Grades 1 and 2, being the primary basic foundational grades, are not given enough attention. So now at least Padhe Bharat Badhe Bharat talks about four hours of instruction per day. We have to see how it is implemented but the intention is evident.

The book publishing programme sees what available literature there is in the market and what the gaps are. We try to fill those through our own publications, which are not for sale, only for our libraries. Typically, the kind of exercise we do is what this table says.

LEVELS	SIMPLE CONCEPT BOOK	FOLKLORE & FANTASY	REALISTIC FICTION	NON-FICTION
LEVEL 1				
LEVEL 2				
LEVEL 3				
LEVEL 4				
LEVEL 5				
LEVEL 6				
LEVEL 7				

We have genres – simple concept books, folklore, fantasy, fiction, non-fiction – and various levels of books. Then we scan all the literature that is available. Typically, we notice that most Indian publishers publish books more at the level of 5-6-7, which is more like for Grades 3-4-5. There is very little children's literature available at the very low levels, for Grades 1 and 2, especially non-fiction and simple concept books. There is a lot of folklore and fantasy available – typically the Panchatantra, Jataka kind of stories. This exercise shows us where the gap areas are. In an analysis we did last year, we realized that simple concept books for Level 2 are absolutely not available, and that is what we are publishing now. Of course, we print very small numbers. We have just done about 150 titles till now, in a few languages, only for filling the gaps, like I said.

Simultaneously, we engage with publishers. We present this analysis to them to show them the gaps, and what they could be publishing. This is under the larger mandate of developing

enough children's literature so that a culture of reading can be created.

Next I will talk about our plans for scaling up some of these things. But at this point, I will stop briefly for some questions, if any, on our programmes.

Q&A

Devika: You mentioned decoding. So I am assuming that you are going through the alphabet and not the whole-word approach. That, to my mind, is the more difficult path to take if you are trying to teach reading. Then the first question is, why didn't you think of taking the whole-word approach where you display words and children come to the alphabet much later, making reading much easier? It starts with comprehension, not with abstraction.

Related to that, there is a lot of work I have come across from the state of Victoria in Australia, where they talk about frequently used words. They call them 'magic words', and say that children already know two-thirds of any text. When I first came across this, it seemed startling to me that you can actually get children to underline words that they are already familiar with, called the high-frequency words that appear again and again in any text. So is there any attempt to isolate those words first? The pedagogy of language – especially reading – says that you must first get them familiar with words they already know. Then you just build on the confidence of 'I already know so much of reading, I need to just battle with a couple of other things' – the one-third, of which some are proper nouns and don't need to have any meaning, and a couple of other things.

The second thing is, where you were talking about reading with comprehension, 'How do you really measure comprehension?' was a question. The ultimate aim of any reading – individual reading – should be that you are able to read, summarize, ask some clarifying questions to yourself, and also predict what is going to happen next, which Kamala Mukunda of CFL (Centre for Learning) mentions in her book What Did You Ask At School Today?. There is research done by Ann Brown on this reciprocal reading, where children read first in the group – because you said there is group reading – but they also must read alone later. So when you say 'reading with comprehension', is there some attention paid to this kind of comprehension?

Sourav: On the whole-language approach, it was a conscious decision

to not adopt that for a couple of reasons. One is that the last – 2000-2001 – National Reading Panel gave a recommendation. There has also been a lot of international research that says decoding is important and that the whole-language approach need not work best in all settings. So our contention is that Indian languages, or any alpha-syllabic language, where sound and letter coordination is one-to-one – unlike English, where you can have multiple options – it is easier to adopt the phonics approach in the initial stages. So that has been our belief. Again, as I said, this is a very evolving organization. If two years down the line we find that this is not working, we will change it.

On the common words, you are right, children do know a lot of the words when they come into school. But they know it as a word. It is an oral language comprehension, not necessarily reading comprehension. To change from oral language to reading is a challenge. So in the initial activities there are a lot of phonological awareness exercises with local words – taking their own words and trying to identify the sounds. So ultimately, it is a question of how to identify and manipulate sounds.

Devika: Also pictures?

Sourav: Pictures. So it is not traditional phonics way where you take the letters of the alphabet and say them over and over again. It is more like getting them to the sound level. So we get them to identify, manipulate, sediment and blend sounds, a bit different from a traditional approach. Yet it is not the whole-language approach.

On comprehension, there are two things. The measurement, of course, is very simplistic because we use an international tool that measures some very basic things. So we would ask a child to read a passage and ask some questions. But in conjunction, every day, there is specific classroom instruction on comprehension. A teacher reads out a passage and asks the child to predict. Prediction is one part of that – there is also summarizing, and inferential what-why-who kind of questions. So there is a strategy where we go from the simple to the difficult, which is built into the instruction design at various stages. Having said that, if we think things are not working out, we might change the approach.

Ankur: I want to get a sense of your costs – one is the set-up cost and the other is all these different interventions you are

talking about. Also, I understand that content would be very different, but what else would differ if you were to try to extend this to adult literacy?

Sourav: I guess adult literacy would be pretty different, in the sense that the way adults learn would be different. You cannot have a phonics approach. It has to be a whole-language approach, because the adult will always learn the language first and then come down to specifics.

On the cost aspect, it is expensive right now. The second part of my presentation is about how to scale up, and one of the impediments to scale is cost. All other costs we can do away with, but the basic cost is books, and that is our biggest stumbling block. We are currently negotiating with the government to take away everything else but at least have books in the room. The child doesn't have anything except textbooks, and you can't expect the child to develop an independent reading habit if you don't give books. That's a big negotiation with the government because we provide almost Rs 50,000 worth of books. No government is ever going to provide that but we are exploring what other options there could be.

Right now, we are in discussions with a couple of state governments to procure titles from NBT or CBT which are typically not very expensive. There are titles available in Creative Commons which do not have copyright – for the state to just take them and print them would be much cheaper. There could be the option of not having a library in every school, but one for ten schools – you have one book bank, and rotate the books.

There are options that could be worked out. But the challenge often is that the government is, in the first instance, not even willing to look at it as an investment that they have to make. At this time, I think our struggle is more to get the governments to admit that this is required for the child, and that they have to find ways to invest in books.

We saw assessments of our programmes showing that our children are learning very well, and then the ASER report came out at the end of the year that said nothing was happening. It was frustrating to know that nothing was changing. But then we realized that we hardly attempt even 10 per cent of the total schools, so the achievements of these children are never going to make any significant impact on the larger system.

That is why for the last couple of years we have been very concerned about scale, so that there could be a more significant

impact on the reading levels of children. We did a bit of research on that in India and a few neighbouring countries, and various NGO initiatives that had tried to scale up. We found, essentially, two different kinds of pathways. One is where the NGO itself expands – doing 20 schools this year, 200 schools next year, 2000 schools the following year, and so on. Many well known NGOs follow this model. But as you expand, you start spreading yourself thin and, as a result, your controls diminish and the programme fidelity fizzles out. If you want to maintain the same fidelity, then your overhead costs go so high up that no one is willing to fund you. So it is a kind of Catch-22 situation.

The other option is where, in the government, suddenly a minister or a secretary likes a very good NGO programme and wants to adopt it for the whole state. That is again difficult because there is no ownership at the system level. It is driven by just one person. What happens is that resistance starts creeping in from the ground level. In the process, the government takes some arbitrary decision about dropping something and the most critical parts of the programme fall through. So these kinds of models have failed, and scaling up NGO efforts has not been a very happy experience in India.

Internationally, MSI (Management Systems International) has worked extensively on scaling up. They say, and research confirms, that among the key failure points of scale-up, one is the evidence. You have to have evidence that it is workable. Cost-effectiveness is the second key issue where it falls through, as well as compatibility between the pilot and the larger system. Contextualization is also a problem.

In our own reflections we find that sometimes NGO interventions like ours have so many components that when you take them to the government it says, "We can't do all of this," and it falls through. Also, if you were to scale up with the government, you would have to see whether the government systems have the capacity and funds for it, and of course, political support. So the more complex and the more costly the programme is, the less likelihood there is of it getting adopted in the system.

At the same time, what is the value-add that an NGO brings? If you are to do what the government is anyway doing, then you don't need an NGO or civil society, or any new approach. A new approach takes you further away from what the government does. But your value-add is only when you are doing something different. There is always this is kind of a tension, that as you keep

on value-adding, you are going further away from the government system, and the less likelihood of your programme being adopted by the system.

(Slide shows graphic of a small triangle where the value-add has a likelihood of adoption and scale-up. The idea is to increase that triangle. The way to do that is to improve the quality of programmes, and at the same time to work on cost effectiveness, scalability and sustainability issues. The idea is that if these two mesh together – if the intersection point is higher – then the government would be in a better position to scale things up.)

So the RTR approach has three basic steps:

- Create evidence of the success of the model, because evidence, we find, sells. If you provide decision makers with hard evidence of things happening, it usually makes them look up.
- Simplify and standardize the model – which is something, as an NGO, we probably would not like to do. But we realize that if we are talking about large-scale implementation, we will have to do it.
- Prepare the system to adopt the model on a large scale.

These are the plans. We are still looking for funds to help this roll out in some states. We realize it is not possible for the government to take up all the components we have – family, community, infrastructure, access – that peg onto our model. Obviously, we would like to do all of that. We would like to do community engagement in a very intensive way. But in a government scaled up programme that is never going to work, and the value that you get from community engagement is probably not the same as what you get from investing that money in teacher education.

So we did a cost analysis to see which components would give us maximum impact, and focused on three – teacher training, instruction material and school level support. Again, this is not ideal. We continue to implement the ideal model, but wherever we negotiate with the government for scale-up, we focus on these three basics.

We are trying to consolidate all our material. There was a point when our programme gave the schools a huge kit of material apart from storybooks. We found that it was not going anywhere because nobody was actually willing to set it up. So now we have combined all our instruction material and collapsed them into workbooks, and we tell the government to just use those. They have all the stories, all the words, everything embedded in them, so there is no need to

invest in 20 different kinds of material.

Standard instruction routine is a very debatable thing. We ourselves debated endlessly on that because we understand. But it also came from the field, from more and more teachers. We want teachers to be reflective practitioners but many told us, "Don't tell us the theory and ask us to implement it in the school. It doesn't work because we cannot do that and we go back to our old processes. Tell us what to do."

Many teachers manage various different things – huge classroom sizes, multi-grade situations, work-life balance – and to expect them to reflect, develop lesson plans and do it every day doesn't work. So we gave them standard instruction routines, kind of teacher guides. Again, contrary to popular belief, these don't restrict the teacher from being creative, because teachers who are creative will anyway be so. They would probably not even look at the guides. But at least the teacher who was not doing anything much has something now in hand to refer to.

The other thing that these guides do is to offset the need for high quality training. As I was saying, as we cascade the training downwards – and in the larger programmes, it cascades further and further – the quality goes down. At least here you have material available to the teacher, which is directly what you want to say, and teachers do not have to spend a lot of time in planning. The material is as yet all in English but is getting translated.

The training is more video based – videos of actual classroom situations and how teachers are managing those, with discussions around them. A lot of these are getting standardized now, as are the monitoring systems. One of the key problems in the monitoring system was that if three members of the staff went to a school, they came back with three different kinds of feedback about the school. One said it was a nice school; the other said, no, the teacher was not doing what she should; and the third one said something else. We have been trying to tell them, if you are doing a classroom observation, just stick to observing what you are supposed to. We are trying help the CRC (Cluster Resource Centre) or the BRC (Block Resource Centre) system, so that there is a more uniform way of looking at things.

Preparing for the large-scale system is a more difficult process. It is more about workshops, various policy level discussions, and discussions like this where we come out and speak. For the last ten years, we were still not very sure about what we were doing but now we are in a better position to talk about it. As I said, we

have been advocating a lot for the Padhe Bharat Badhe Bharat kind of instruction time issues. The good part is that now we now have a lot of evidence to show that instruction time, allowing children have a reading period, does make a difference to the reading abilities of children, and we can go to the government with it.

The scale-up mode cannot just be left to the government. There has to be a demonstration phase where we test it out and show the government. But there would also have to be a partnership phase where we work proactively with the government to have them scale up. What we mean basically is that we do all the master trainers' training, then ask the government to do the teacher training, and when that happens our people are there to support the master trainers. So we do the CRC training, but want the CRCs to shift from their monitoring attitude to a supporting attitude. Now, that is best demonstrated in the school – it cannot be explained through a training session. Our staff goes with the CRCs to the school and then coaches them on how that happens. We have some ideas about this, but are still not very clear and would be happy to get more suggestions.

Then of course, there are the other things that most organizations do – try to identify champions who can lead this process, and build the capacity of the government officials, DIETs and SCERTs. We are trying to talk to anybody who is willing to listen to us and tell them about our programme, what international research is saying, what makes sense in the area of upgrading, and to look at how government resources like SSA (Sarva Shikha Abhiyan) can be used for some of these activities.

Among the failure points, there is one that we haven't been able to correct at all, which is political support – very dicey. But we have tried and resolved most of the other issues. So, as I said, this is something that we are going to launch over the next few years and then see if it works or not. I am not claiming that it is unique, but it is something we are just going to try out and see. We have based it on research, on evidence, and on our experience. So the hope is that it will work.

Q&A

Arvind: At one level, there are some philosophical differences on language learning and acquisition but maybe that requires a separate session. Secondly, I think we sometimes work at cross-purposes. I am not asking you this, but reflecting on our own work.

Let's say we work with the primary school curriculum. The kind of reading we expect of children in Classes 1-3, what material they would use, and how you approach the teachers is already embedded. Some groups like us might start a curriculum. Then that is kept aside and a reading programme may be started. There has to be some synergy in working together, otherwise it creates a very cynical approach at the top about new programmes. Given my 30 years of work experience, I can sense that. Your plan gets invited, there is some energy for one or two years, and then it is left out. And if the reading programme does not dovetail into the classroom material that is going to be used every day, then it is not going to make sense. It won't deliver the larger expectations. I think that at that level, we must have some synergy among our own fraternity to see that we can work together on many things.

Sourav: I fully agree with you. All our discussions have always been that in the programme we do, in the few schools we work in, we are very clear that we are trying an alternate approach. But when we start discussions with the government, the discussion is never "This is our approach and you must use it." The discussion is more in terms of principles.

We believe – and I think nobody would argue on this – that there have to be ready material in the schools. So it is more those kinds of issues that we discuss, not that one approach or the other has to be adopted. That is the discussion that happens with the government, usually with the SCERT. They want to understand our philosophy and training, and find that some things contradict their approach, which we are flexible enough to change.

Arvind: I think there is contradiction, so it would help to bring all the groups together. There is a lot of fragmentation that is evolving – not because of you or me, but the actual situation.

Sourav: There are a couple of states that are smart. They say that NGO 1 should run the programme in ten schools, NGO 2 in ten others, and NGO 3 in another ten. They see which of these approaches work and then take a decision. That could be one way of doing it. Another would be that all the three groups sit together and decide on the best approach.

Prasoon: It would be interesting to understand why children don't read, because there is evidence that they don't even if

books are available. It is also said that the manner in which they are taught to decode is not right, that they are taught to decode meaninglessly. Maybe they are not able to figure out semantics or syntactic structure?

Sourav: As I said, our growth is based on the international research of the last five-six years which says that decoding is very important. Of course, how it is being taught is vital. Our effort is not to put books in the library but to get the teacher to do all those reading aloud and shared reading activities, which we think are essential for the utilization of the library. So that is one part of it.

On the specific reading instruction strategy, we still differ from the larger body of work that has been done in the country. The NCF (National Curriculum Framework) has talked about a more whole-language approach, and all schools are adopting that. In many states, the curriculum says this is necessary. But then, we are still not seeing that this approach has resulted in better reading levels. So we are saying that here is an alternative approach – not that you have to adopt it. We feel that this works better, and are seeing some initial results for it, so let's try it out in a district or state and see if it leads to a better result.

If you get into the technicalities of it, we still think decoding is important. If the child comes with prior knowledge, that's fine – that knowledge will help the child to read out what she knows. But the objective is actually to move to a situation where s/he can read new texts not encountered before. And in order to do that, you need decoding skills. You have to know how to identify the sounds, and be able to manipulate the sounds in order to decode.

If I have to teach English, I would never go by a phonics method at all. Again, we are not saying that decoding is what you start with, but that decoding is important. You definitely start with a lot of oral work, a gamut of activities. A major problem we observe in schools is that there are not enough oral language activities. Teachers don't talk a lot to the children, or read out stories – all that is missing. An important thing is, for example with Hindi, very few people speak Hindi the way it is read. They have their own dialects. So even to understand 'book' Hindi, you have to have adequate listening comprehension in order to move to reading comprehension. That stage is almost non-existent, as of now.

Vibha: There is already a lot of conflict over how children should read. But my question is on publishing. When you are entering that

domain, you are getting into the question of what they should read. I want to know if you are going to take a non-controversial approach. I just saw Ambar aur Paani. I don't know what it is about. But one way of approaching the topic of water is to talk about the water cycle – non-controversial. Another way is to bring in elements of drought, pollution of water, who pollutes it and all that – the current context – which can potentially bring you into conflict with the government or interest groups. What is Room to Read's approach on that?

Sourav: As of now, we have really not gone into those details. Our approach has been to have books that are interesting and exciting for students. To get them to pick up the books and want to read is the basic idea. We have had requests from the government to publish books on sanitation, or other issues, but we haven't still done that.

But we don't have a stand on it as yet. If I sell 1000 books to a library, 900 of them are available in the market. I am not developing those books. I am developing only those that I see are not in the market. Typically, for Grades 3-4-5 there is enough material. You can debate how good or bad they are, but at least Eklavya, Pratham, CBT, NBT, Tulika and Katha have enough numbers of books. What you don't get is for the absolutely beginner readers. So that has been our focus. Publishers say there is no demand for those books, that they don't sell, so they can't publish those books in large quantities. We saw that as an area that we could fill.

But we have been in discussions with publishers on what can be done, how to develop a culture of reading and what is it children want. We are also doing studies to find out what are the titles that children like. It throws up surprises because the titles which we think are rubbish, sometimes teachers and children like the most. So the decision for us is whether to publish what you want children to read, or what children themselves want to read. These are all debatable questions which have no 'yes or no' answers to them.

Aruna: I just hope there are some fun books in these and not all worksheet-able books.

Sourav: No, no – they are all fun books. That is the basic premise.

Can the Public Education System Meet the Needs of the Marginalized?

Harsh Mander, Shubra Chatterjee, Shivani Taneja

HARSH MANDER is a social worker and writer, who works with survivors of mass violence and hunger, as well as homeless persons and street children. He is Director, Centre for Equity Studies and Special Commissioner to the Supreme Court of India in the Right to Food case. He has been associated with several campaigns for secularism and legal justice and reconciliation for the survivors of communal violence. He worked formerly in the Indian Administrative Service for almost two decades.

SHUBRA CHATTERJEE is one of the founders of Vikramshila - a Kolkata based resource organisation founded in 1989, that works in the field of elementary education in India and advocates actively on the issues of quality and equity. She has been the Director of the organization since 1993. The organisation aims to make quality education a reality for all children. They also run an experimental school for children from marginalized communities in a village called Bigha, in Burdwan district of West Bengal.

SHIVANI TANEJA is co-founder of Muskaan, an organization that works with vulnerable slum communities in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh on issues of education, identity, violence, survival needs of health and nutrition and tries to enhance livelihoods and savings through microcredit. Since its inception in 1998, Muskaan's work has expanded from 6 to 24 slums in the city of Bhopal. One of Muskaan's key focus areas is on the education of children from communities that are unable to access mainstream schools.

Shaheen: We have three people on the panel for this discussion. All of you know Harsh Mander, who after a career in the Indian Administrative Services started an organization called the Centre for Equity Studies as well as the Aman Biradari collective. Education for street children is one of the issues that Harsh has been working with in the last five-six years. You may also have followed his writings in the media and his initiatives in advocacy.

Then there's Shubhra-di from Vikramshila, which has just completed 25 years of working with marginalized communities in Kolkata and elsewhere in West Bengal. Their work in the Naba Disha centres, largely with Muslim communities and madrasa boards, and also in schools with remedial education, throws light on the question of marginalization in the education system at different levels.

We also have Shivani, who is with Muskaan of Bhopal, working with the the Gond, Pardhi and many other urban tribal communities for whom it has been difficult to join the mainstream and be part of the education process of government schools.

Harsh Mander: All of us are here because we have lost faith in the potential of school education to change what is wrong with India, the one article of faith that we carried right from independence. But let us just stop for a minute and ask: Why do we have so much faith in the transformational potential of education? Why do we believe that education would change India in the way nothing else really could? Why do we believe that universal education is so crucial?

Let me start unpacking our expectations from education as socially transformational. There are three clusters of expectations. One is that education will allow you to escape from poverty, prepare you better for the market, for employment and so on. That is a utilitarian expectation. The second is that it would

result in greater equality of opportunity. And in a society which civilizationally has sanctioned the idea of caste, it is a very crucial idea. The third, I think, is the most important and difficult of all. We talked about scientific temper, rationality, humanity, the fighting of communal and caste prejudice, gender – there was an expectation that education would help build better human beings, make for better citizenship.

When we look back to what we have actually accomplished in the 65-plus years after independence, I feel that education has helped to the extent that wherever you are placed, it helps you go further in terms of livelihood opportunities, what you do with your life. But far from paving the way for equity, the educational system entirely reflects the inequalities of society. Where you are born determines whether you will be able to go to school and what kind of schooling you will have. The richest will go abroad, the somewhat rich will send their children to private schools, and so on. In fact, far from building greater equality, it is enabling and reproducing society's inequalities. That is a profound failure.

But there is an even greater failure. The work I do allows me the privilege of spending a lot of time with very marginalized people, who have suffered from violence, and are living with hunger, homelessness, discrimination... If I can make an observation which probably requires greater empirical backing, it is that the greatest chances of finding people who are instinctively, intuitively nice, rational, humane, compassionate, inclusive and without prejudice, is in those who have the least education.

As people get more and more educated, we find more and more evidence of prejudice. I have just written a book centred on this, called *Looking Away: Inequality, Prejudice and Indifference in New India*. It is about this worry, about how we, the Indian middle class, are so indifferent to the suffering that surrounds us, how much we have legitimized prejudice against Muslims and other groups in the way we conduct our public and private discourses.

How do we make the educational system more equitable? Who is being excluded from it? Who are the children being left out? Centrally, where we went drastically wrong was in not adopting a common-school system. Sometimes people ask me to fantasize about the one thing I would do if were Prime Minister, or able to influence the Prime Minister. Neither is likely to happen in several lifetimes, but if it did, the one thing that I feel would most of all change India would be inclusive classrooms – creating a classroom where my child, the child of my domestic help and a street child

could study together, grow up together, become friends; creating that space where Hindus and Muslims, rich and poor, and people of diversities study together.

This book is really about, as Arundhati Roy said very evocatively, the one successful secession in our country, of the middle class from the rest of India. We created this very separate world of ours with our gated colonies, malls, air-conditioned schools and private transport. The only poor people we interact with are the people who serve us, and we don't interact as equals. So the common-school system is something we need to fight for, although it is completely contrary to the currents of our time.

I would like to talk about children who would be left out even if we had an ideal common-school system. The design of something like the RTE (Right to Education), whatever difficulties we might have with it, is still a very important measure for children who actually are completely forgotten even by the RTE. Let me explain. Assuming that RTE or a common-school system is well implemented – with well functioning schools, and open, welcoming and inclusive – in every neighbourhood across the country, would every child be in school? Who wouldn't want to be schooled?

We somehow seem to have tacitly agreed to deal with the new mainstream. In a sense, the last child has to come last in our prioritization, so we will deal with the bulk. And if those children live in a space still not covered, it is all right. One of the slogans Gandhiji gave us was, "Last person first," and I am suggesting that in everything we do we think of the last child first. If what we plan in our education system is welcoming and sensitive to that last child – and it is possible – then it will be even better and more appropriate, even for children who are further up the line. But whether we say it clearly or not, even the most progressive of us feel that these are 'marginal' issues because they are 'marginal' children, and let's not bother. Resources are limited. Time is limited. Let's come to them some later time.

Who are these children being left out? I would say the first broad category is children without responsible adult protection. These include street children who have run away from abusive, violent families, which is the large bulk of boys you see on the street. Also those who have a destitute mother, for instance, or who don't have a home at all, orphaned children and so on.

To my mind, all of us would agree that there are certain necessary but not sufficient conditions for a child to access

education. She must have a full stomach, she must be protected, her health should be taken care of. It is impossible to believe that a child can be sleeping under the open sky or looking for food in rubbish heaps, malnourished, sick, unprotected and sexually abused, and happily walk into school because there is the RTE, and then walk out again to lead this life. It's not going to happen.

What I tend to argue here is that the unstated assumption of the RTE is that these necessary conditions – the right to protection, food, nutrition, healthcare – are going to be provided by the family. Therefore, what the state really has to do is to provide the Right to Education. My argument is that for those children whose families don't exist or are unable, for various reasons, to provide these other rights, the Right to Education is an empty right – it is inaccessible, in its very nature, to these children.

That is where the imagination of both the idea and the ideality of the common-school system somewhere might exclude these children. I would like to know how it is in the actual functioning. The street child, who is working, clearly will not be able to enter your school. Here I think we have to nuance our debate because, up to now, most of us emphasized that a working child is potentially any child who is not in regular school. But the government recently said something quite alarming, that there is no problem with children working as long as they study in school as well. There is talk about amending the Child Labour Act to that effect. This requires a great deal of discussion and we need to articulate our response. Now clearly, rightfully, if working is fine, if we feel that is socially acceptable, then let middle class people send their children out to work at the same ages that working class people send theirs. We cannot be different.

So the working child is the second category, along with children of migrant and nomadic families. You know, if your household has to travel eight or nine months in a year in distress, in hunger... Lon Williams uses a very evocative phrase. He says we forget that large segments of our workforce are hunters and gatherers of work. He says that there are people who are desperate to find any kind of work, on any terms, in any corner of the country. I found people from Bihar and Jharkhand in the interiors of Kashmir. They go anywhere to work and earn money, and their families travel with them. What happens about their children's education?

Then you have the traditionally nomadic communities. What happens to their children? There are children of highly stigmatized parentage – denotified tribes, former criminal tribes like the Vaghris,

communities that are considered still criminal and therefore continuously on the run from the police and the legal system; sex workers; parents who have leprosy or HIV-AIDS; manual scavengers; trans-people and so on. This kind of parentage can exclude you completely from schooling.

It is the same for children affected by conflict. After every communal riot – and I have worked with many rehabilitation efforts – one of the first things that happens is that children are not able to study further. In areas affected by Maoist or militant violence, children have no opportunity to go to school.

This is an illustrative list. The number of children is not small. We don't have a way of counting many of these groups because there are no reliable estimates. But certainly I would think that they constitute anything between five and ten per cent of our children. My plea is, let us not forget them when we talk about education for all. In fact, we should design systems that are particularly sensitive to the needs of these children, because then we will include other children as well, much more.

I will give you a few examples of interventions that are not NGO-scale or small-scale, which are important and valuable but large-scalable options. They are not difficult or even highly expensive options – if these children are important.

The first is concerning street children. We learnt this first from a very sensitive NGO, of Sister Cyril in Sealdah, Kolkata. Very briefly, her story is that she was running a conventional Loreto Convent school of the kind that many of us would have studied in, for children from elite and middle class backgrounds. One day, a very young street girl got raped just outside the gates of the convent. Something sort of snapped in Sister Cyril's head and she thought, "Is this why I am running this convent?" At the time when this happened, the school was empty – as it is for 16-18 hours of the day. And those are the very hours when a homeless child is most vulnerable. So she decided to open the school to allow those children to live there. She added an extra floor and lockers etc, and welcomed the children in. She called them Rainbow Children.

There were a lot of reactions from middle class parents, and Sister Cyril told them they could take their children out if they wanted to. She had bargaining power, of course, because parents wanted their children to be in that school. She also told them very clearly that they would have to pay extra for these kids – she openly cross-subsidized. She also had a system for the kids. Every period, one section would go upstairs to do child-to-child

teaching. She said, "We teach hands-on computers and so on, so why not hands-on compassion? Children are much better for that kind of interaction."

Within about a year or year-and-a-half, the child would be ready to enter into regular school. If they were small, they entered the same convent; if they were older, they entered Bengali-medium schools in the vicinity. About 'adjustment' she would ask, "Why is the burden of adjustment only on the underprivileged child? Why can't the privileged adjust?' She found, for example, that those girls found it difficult to get used to wearing footwear. So she made it a part of the school uniform that up to Class 6, all girls would take off their shoes and walk barefoot in the school. They adjusted to being barefoot and she created a very inclusive kind of act.

Looking at this, I wondered, why can't we do this in the public school system? Delhi alone has 50,000 street kids. If I were Prime Minister for that one day, 500 of these schools would be converted overnight into day-cum-residential schools. It costs only about ten lakh to refurbish a school, and physical spaces exist for every homeless child to be included. The costs are not spectacular at all. It is probably the spaces in our hearts that don't seem to open up.

This became an idea. It looked like a crazy kind of idea, but over about seven years now, we have been able to get 45 schools to open up – 40 are government schools, the other five are Loreto schools. It has been wonderful for all children. Our children heal, forgive – they have a lot to forgive. Remarkably, they give up drugs without a problem, and are performing very well. But the children from the rich families, as well as the teachers, also learn a lot from these kids. And it is possible to do this.

Two other very quick examples. One is about migrant children. From Bolangir in Odisha, where there is extreme hunger, one lakh workers migrate every year. They take their families, and we found that they go to places like the brickfields on the outskirts of Hyderabad. There is no question of a child's schooling to continue. Speaking to the families, I asked, "Why do you take your children? Their studies are interrupted. Their lives will never change." They said, "Where do we leave them?"

So there was the idea to simply convert the village school into a community hostel where those 10-15 children of migrating parents could stay. Their caregivers could be the grandparents who, because of poverty, are usually abandoned by the family to either beg or die. Make them community workers – they are the loveliest of caregivers. The only cost to the government is providing food to

all of them. Within a year, we were able to show that about 10,000 children were saved from migration. It is not yet accepted as a scheme but quite probable. It is so doable, so simple.

The other example is about sex workers' children. Their working hours are at night, when children are really vulnerable. The idea is not to separate those children from their mothers. So why can't the same idea apply? Schools around a red-light area can actually be converted into night care centres, with older, retired sex workers appointed as caretakers. The children go there in the evening, do their homework, sleep there in a safe environment. In the morning, they come back, go to school and stay with their mothers.

These illustrations are all completely doable, scalable solutions, using public systems and resources. My plea is that we really have to be convinced about the importance of that last child. I believe that the Rainbow Schools are much better schools as a result of their being sensitive to that last child. So if the imagination not only includes but prioritizes that last child, then the entire system gets humanized. All those ideas that I call egalitarian compassion, empathy, learning from each other, diversity of the classroom – all of these are ensured for all children if we think of that last child.

Shubhra Chatterji: You have set the stage so macro that I find it difficult to take over from where you have left off. So I go back to my own very small experiences of working with marginal groups.

Can public education meet the needs of the marginalized? I think it has to, but it is not yet ready – and that is what we are trying to find answers for. I will start with the story of a girl, Shagufta. She lives in Metiabruz, a densely populated area in the fringes of Kolkata, typically underserved and under-resourced, and worse, branded as crime prone. What are the chances of this girl going to school, completing her education, aiming for higher education and aspiring for jobs outside her own world?

There is a short film on Metiabruz, – crime prone but with a rich heritage. The community there is believed to have descended from Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, and has remained very insular. We made the film as part of a history project of the children there. It helped the children in many ways to understand themselves and the social-cultural capital of their world. It gave them a sense of pride and belonging, and a sense of responsibility. And all of these somehow contributed to their better performance and

retention in the school system of which they were a part.

What is their world like? Lack of access to education at all levels continues. There are anomalies like Bengali-medium schools running empty and yet no place in the crowded Urdu-medium schools. There are easy earning opportunities for all age groups in home based small scale workshops, the casual labour market, in embroidery, zari work and kite-making, and also smuggling in the port area. The combination of all of this is potent – anything can happen.

There is also a peculiar ambivalence. The people there are not very convinced about the effectiveness of education in providing employment opportunities. They openly say they can earn as much without it. Yet there is an aspiration for education among women. Shagufta is one of many children receiving supplemental support in our Naba Disha Education Centres while attending a formal school. She is now in Class 10 and aspires to be a lawyer.

There was a girl who was a school dropout. When we asked her why she left school, she said, "If the teacher isn't interested in teaching, how will we be interested?" There was a lot that went on apart from studies, she told us. She came back to studying with Naba Disha because there was something more in it, though she asked, "What is the point of forcing yourself to study when you don't get a job?"

Mohammad Danish, who had never been to school, joined Naba Disha and was mainstreamed after two months. He is now in college. He had been angry since his childhood, he used to say, and described himself as a short-tempered foul-mouthed boy who got irritated. He was very destructive and aggressive. "Here, Nargis Ma'am taught me that if I wanted to progress in life, I would have to change. Naba Disha is like a home to me," he now says. He dreams of being an engineer, and his aggression has been channelled in that direction.

We brought children who had never been to school or dropped out due to lack of motivation into our centres, prepared them for getting into schools and provided them with economic and socio-emotional support to help them complete their education. Academic support is a very small part. Our teachers are not even qualified enough for that. It is just that children have a space with us, where they are accepted as who they are. Without this additional support, they would have had a different growth trajectory.

To find out about the effectiveness of this kind of support we undertook a study to assess two groups of children – one group

received additional support at Naba Disha centres, the other did not. All 100 children were in government schools in Classes 3 and 4, from the same socio-economic background. We conducted not a floor-level test like ASER, but a grade-level test to ascertain whether the children were at a certain grade. Donors also make you do such things – these are necessary evils! The comparative results showed that, in Language, 80 per cent children in the schools not receiving support were not at grade level; with the other group, it was a mirror image, with 78.4 per cent at the level. In Maths, 96.12 per cent children from the non-supported group were not at grade level; 85 per cent children from the Naba Disha group were. I am not saying, however, that all children at Naba Disha are at grade level – there are still issues.

Reflections after the study showed that those with very poor learning levels were most likely to discontinue their education because there was no motivation, and they anyway had earning opportunities, whereas children in Naba Disha centres were most likely to continue with their education. We feel it is not a simple case of good versus bad teaching. Obviously, the children get something from Naba Disha centres that is missing in formal schools.

One reason perhaps is that Naba Disha accepts their socio-cultural capital and sees it as a strength, which the formal schools do not. I feel that these children are very strong in their individualism and self-assertion. Something is amiss in the existing system, which needs immediate attention. When more than 80 per cent children in a class need remediation, perhaps it is the system that needs remediation and not the children. How much can individual remediation do? Of late, we have been working more and more with government schools but end up doing only remediation. It is very frustrating. Only after two years of it can we bring the children somewhere and start doing what we had originally intended to do.

You find another instance of marginalization in Bongaigaon in Assam. It is a char area that gets severely affected by flood and erosion, and it is very challenging to live there. Inhabitants need to shift their houses. There are almost no livelihood options, which is 180 degrees from what we found in Metiabruz – a different set of challenges. People migrate in search of work. Community education is low priority compared to survival issues that haunt them. Then there are Muslim-Bodo riots, so riot-affected children are another issue. Education of children residing in the

refugee camps had come to a standstill and they became isolated from mainstream society. JMECT (Jubayer Masud Educational and Charitable Trust) is an organization that works with affected children, helping to mainstream then into government schools.

Ultimately, it is government schools that the bulk of children go to, and it is a fact that they largely cater to children from marginalized communities. But the system is still not prepared for this. It has opened up in the last 25 years. Sometimes I get very frustrated, but then I think, what is 25 years in the broader picture? Perhaps we are impatient. The car has changed gears, even if there is a lot of work that needs to be done. Inclusion is on paper but it has not got into the spirit of the system.

Our higher education system is too hierarchically split, in 13 or 14 layers, and the common-school idea seems like an impossible dream. But people like us have to keep working with government schools to ensure their survival. Transformation will come later. With the shrinking space and the pace of privatization is happening, all these are big issues.

Shivani: When we started our work in education, we thought it would be overcoming a big challenge if we got children who were out of school into schools, and if they learnt in schools. We got over those two ideas – if they didn't go to schools, we could still ensure learning. But the learning of children from marginalized communities is something we are still engaging with, and sometimes we don't have answers.

Will the public education system reach the marginalized? I think, yes, it will. It may not be reaching a big chunk of children today, like those from denotified tribes, other tribal communities and homeless children. It will, finally, perhaps ten years down the line. But will it meet the needs of the marginalized?

If we say it is going to reach the marginalized, then the basic ideal of a school space – dignity to children, dignity to the community, positive relationships with children and their learning, irrespective of which background the children come from – is what is mandated for children from marginalized communities too. If that exists, then children learn – in different spaces, wherever they get entry. But seeing it through the children's experiences, as an individual, I would reject school. Working in the education system for 17 years, I'd still reject school, because more than what they give to children, schools are violent towards children in many, many ways.

Just recently, we were in a workshop with children from

different communities. When we asked them to open up about the problems they face, children from denotified tribes talked about police atrocities. You just have to tell them that this is a space where they can speak, and every child will tell you about the number of times he has been beaten up or electrocuted by the police. If you allow them to speak about school spaces, they will tell you about the abuse they get.

So schools are not the positive spaces we imagine – they are really fearful. You can speak about the universalization of elementary education, but I am talking about very basic things. A child from a marginalized background in a school is not safe. Whether schools will change or not to suit my terms – from my experience of working with marginalized children – those working in the school system would be better able to say. Teaching may go on, but ridiculing a child, telling her that her parents have not made her worth anything, the small rebukes that keep coming in... are these what we want our children to grow up with?

I will go back ten years to our first experience of putting Pardhi children – from a denotified tribe – in a government school. It may be an extreme example, but the police were called twice by the school with the complaint that our organization was pushing for these children to be enrolled. This was before RTE. You cannot publicly show that attitude now because you can't disallow a child from entering school, but that mentality towards children from marginalized communities is, in some form of the other, still prevalent. So the public education system can certainly take in children. Learning literacy and numeracy is not a big deal – children learn to read and write very easily and quickly. This is basic in schools for everybody, not specifically for the marginalized. But if you look at the objectives of education and the length of school life, then that is a different issue with regard to marginalized communities.

Our experiences are with children in family situations, not those who are homeless. So they are not fully in our control, in that sense. They have their family customs and traditions which they go back to, and have not lost their roots. The objectives of education for them are very closely linked to their roots and realities. It is not about living our lives or becoming a part of our mainstream. So what is the main purpose of education we see for the most marginalized? How do we prepare them for the struggles they confront, being a Pardhi or Gondi, being displaced,

losing livelihoods, losing forests…? Do we prepare them for losing land, for violence against them from society in different forms?

Their experience of marginalization is such that even if a child goes with a hundred rupees to buy something from a shop, the shopkeeper says, "Come before four, before the middle-class people start coming in." How do they handle these experiences as marginalized children? These are the issues that we feel are the objectives of education. Similarly, three-four years of education and getting basic skills is quite simple. But continuing after that is a challenge, both because of community norms and the school system.

When we looked at education through these children, we tried to understand why they were going to school – not why they were not going to school – because everything that was happening in school was pushing out children from such backgrounds. We felt that it was because of pressure from outside, and at one point we decided we would not put that pressure on them. If there was something energizing in the school, the children would go themselves. If they rejected a system that was not giving them dignity, it was fair enough. We would reject it too. We had to give them that space.

What has helped Muskaan is that we are very closely situated within the communities – meaning, as much as our interventions in school and education, we are part of children's lives in the communities on a daily basis. So we understand the choices they make. We don't see parents against children – as to why they get children engaged even before they are conceived, why children are being sent for waste picking... We understand that there is a way of life that needs to change and there are issues which will take time. It helps us to strengthen our classroom processes and to not blame children for things that we feel do not fall in line with progress and education.

What are we doing? If you feel that the public education system needs to respond to these things, then what we are doing is nothing magical. What NCF 2005 was talking about is what we are doing. So if we really follow that in spirit, then that is the education that will work. When there is a space for children, there is positive learning, there is a context, and there is content. When the learning is so meaningful and constructive that children feel a sense of achievement, and they come back. And they learn to negotiate at home as to how to come back.

I will give you an example of how we have given space to children. We told them to imagine that one of them was lost – so

where would the others look for that child? The children gave us different stories. One said, "Maybe locked in jail." Another one said, "Maybe gone towards the building." Another child said, "A man may have carried him/her away in a car." These are the realities our children live with and feel comfortable talking about with us, and we use these in our interventions.

The other thing we are doing to take children beyond primary school is giving them exposure and confidence to negotiate space at home for dreaming and thinking about things in life beyond what they are experiencing, or in interacting and networking with other children. Because there is no role model in terms of education in their immediate spheres. There is no one person who has crossed a certain boundary within their group.

Our education system is multilingual. We don't go with a mother-tongue medium but use all the languages of the children – and their class teacher – as a resource in the classroom. We are in the city, within which there are specific tribal pockets, and the teacher doesn't necessarily know the child's language. There is a lot of cross-communication, no one medium of instruction. A lot of translations go on – not like in a seminar, but a discussion of translation. We use the primer of one language to get into another, finding rules together. We learn English through the first language, which could be Gondi or Pardhi. The second language would be Hindi and the third is English.

I feel that in Muskaan, we have been able to overcome the issue of the medium of instruction. We did initially have doubts. The moment a child speaks Pardhi on the road, he would be recognized as one and stigmatized, so should we hide that identity? We decided to use the Devnagari script but use their language, and find they learn faster. They also feel involved because they are the ones who are contributing to the classroom. I, as a teacher, don't know Pardhi. I have to ask the parent or the child the pronunciation of a word to be able to write it in Devnagari. I have to make them repeat it a few times to get it right, so they feel they are the ones correcting the teacher and it makes their involvement much higher and acceptance easier.

We use the children's languages not as a transition but because we feel that children from marginalized communities should be using their language to express their stories and their lives, for their community's voice to come out, and that is going to be possible when they feel rooted within their community. The nuances of their languages and their lives are going to be through

that. It is not a transition plan for Class 3 or 4 – we would like to take it up to Class 12 texts as well.

We realized that because they come from difficult circumstances within the community too, we have to look at things differently. Nandishna studied for three years. She had a difficult life for different reasons. She got married. Now she wants to get back to studies. Then she will have a baby, and study again after that. For her, what is happening today is not forever. So you don't give up on a child at a point in time – it is a longer journey that we travel on. And we have more chances of success because we don't work within a fixed time that we may have set. Thank you.

Sreekanth: Let's now link it to the original question: How can the system serve the marginalized? Either the definition of the system is itself wider – there is a perpetual need for a certain kind of intervention – or the system is what it is. This is outside the system and hence there is a certain giving up on the system. I don't know which of these it is. How do we view this?

Ankur: All the presentations are provoking me to think that perhaps we should re-imagine what our government schools and public schooling systems really need to be doing. We have quite strongly internalized the idea of letting the three R's be taken care of first after which things will follow – the understanding of the word, or, if nothing else let's at least get these in place. We need to maybe re-examine and maybe draw also from the Mahila Samakhya sort of strategy of letting literacy emerge first from an understanding of the world, and then see where other things fit in.

It is also making me question some of my assumptions, because we work with a programme that is trying to give girls who have dropped out of schools a second chance, and help them pass the NIOS (National Institute of Open Schooling) exam. But we are now increasingly struggling with the question of where we are really sending them. Even if they do pass, from these tribal villages where are they going to go? Are they just going to migrate? Are they just going to go into low paying so-called skilled jobs? What are we really creating for them by helping them?

I am also thinking that we need to re-imagine government schools and public schools a little bit because there is an existential threat from many other sectors, the biggest one being real estate. Government schools today are very attractive propositions for the real estate lobby. And when the real estate lobby gets attracted to

something, it's very difficult to keep them out. So unless we are able to connect with and get these communities to say, "We will protect these schools because they have been of value to us," I don't see any hope of holding onto the schools.

Usha Raman: Listening to all three of you, I get the sense that we have looked at the problem from two ends. One is the structural level where we create spaces – physical spaces – and structures to include these children. But then that leaves, in my mind, the much bigger problem of content and what is going on inside, which is what Shivani alluded to. That second challenge is huge. Where do we even begin? If we are going to create inclusive spaces and not do this within small community ventures like Muskaan, how do we tackle that? It seems like the first approach is the relatively easier one – to create structures. What goes on inside those structures is the more difficult problem.

Anjali: Thank you, Harsh, for bringing the last child first. I was thinking, had we looked at it from that perspective, perhaps this session would have been the first, and we would have looked at all our initiatives from the lens of how the last child is being addressed through these initiatives. Perhaps the focus would have then at least increased on the politics of education rather than the pedagogics of it that we have been talking about for the last two days.

I like the way Shivani said that children will learn to read and write, that there's nothing special about it. If you accept them and their lives, reading and writing become trivial pursuits. Yet our greatest debate is so many children not writing, so many children not reading, reading campaigns... That has become a much larger focus.

Having said that, one thing is that – and I would like your views on it – it brings us to the dialectics of the school as a reproductive space, in the sense that it reproduces the inequalities of society. That is why we have, continuously over the last two days, been talking of how we get thrown out when we question those inequities, and trying to use the school and the education system as a transformative space to make education equitable.

I would also like to have reflections on the fact that today government schools – we have done a few surveys in a number of districts in Madhya Pradesh and I am sure it will be borne out by others' experiences – are peopled basically by Dalits, OBCs and girls. If there are any upper caste children, they are usually girls.

So this "flight of the middle class" applies also to the upper castes. My reflection has been that due to the caste structure of society, when you see the emphasis on universalization in the government schools in the 80s, being forced to admit all children, that is when – at least in Madhya Pradesh – the increase in privatization started.

In that light, where is the agency for making common-schools? I am sure that if we have these 20-25 per cent children within schools along with others, the nature of schools would be very different. The issues being dealt with would be very different. But that is not a pedagogical question but a political and social question. Where do we look for the agency of this change? How do we, as civil society, contribute to that agency? Do we want to? And where do we position ourselves in that agency?

Alongside that, as Shivani said, many trends show that with globalization, the poor are becoming poorer, and there are more and more children becoming unprotected and at risk. So, without questioning this economic paradigm, can we – civil society organizations like us – continue to focus only on education and pedagogical issues?

Simantini: I endorse what Anjali and Usha said. In fact, we really don't have a choice but to deal with all these elements together. We cannot – unless we believe that a common-school system is going to address the issues. Good schools cannot be schools which are good schools for the poor and good schools for the middle class and the rest of the world. Good schools are what Harsh began with – at least I believe that. But at the same time, while we are fighting even amongst ourselves to agree with this kind of premise, the issues we take up should make the content of education, the pedagogies, transformative in the public education space – in government schools, rather – because if you do it on a large scale you may have some chance of affecting larger policy issues at some point.

But similarly, there are other mechanisms like real estate that are taking shape through public-private partnership. You can't say that you will fight this battle today and look at something else tomorrow, because all these are extremely entrenched and connected issues. Everybody obviously cannot do everything. But it is essential that everybody looks at everything as equally urgent and with some sort of common understanding.

Margaret: As far as education is concerned, the child is not a problem. Whatever the environment they come from, they have a natural

right to learning, and all children do learn in an environment of love and trust. The problem is how to convince the government that we are not their enemies and not competing with them, but we are their friends, willing to share compassionately, with love and understanding, what we have. Our attitude should change, and their attitude should change. How do we do this?

Bakang: This is really an eye-opener for me. I want to check with the panelists, how can formal education be integrated into accepting that indigenous communities also have a role to play? There is a myth that Western education is the best education.

You spoke about how you are able to use the communities to integrate those kids, and, interestingly enough, from just the experiences of working with homeless children in South Africa, one of the greatest learnings was that without formal education those kids were very wise. They could learn Portuguese because they lived in the streets, because they depend on shops owned by top migrant people who come into the country. They are able to learn Afrikaans without being in a formal school. That, for me, says that informal education can be recognized. So how best can we use indigenous education to bridge the gap, not depend on formal and Western education?

Vishnu: We have been speaking of the state, generally, as one entity. But I would imagine that it isn't. There are many officers, or bureaucrats, or individuals who are part of the government, who are themselves activists similar to many of the speakers. Is that itself a channel? And is it possible to nurture activism within the state, or is that a paradox?

Harsh: I am not relating the involvement of education but utilizing the centrality of politics. Politics, in the widest sense, actually suggests pedagogy within itself. I am was touched very recently when I met someone who runs teacher training centres and I asked if I could send teachers from the Rainbow Homes for these trainings. She said, "But I found your teachers by far the most capable because they have understood things that I keep trying to teach so inappropriately." For a teacher get 20 children of different ages, who have come from the streets, had really difficult lives, and to actually teach them together is wonderful. I realized afresh how wonderful it was that within a year or so these kids were ready to go into regular school, and many of them

performed very well.

So those teachers have actually learnt from the politics and the ethics of their commitment. And I have learnt what has really worked with these kids. It might sound like it doesn't fit into any kind of pedagogical chamber but what these kids are looking for is egalitarian love. They sense it very quickly. I have noticed with most of them that they go to eat, take a bite and then put it into your mouth. If you hesitate, you have lost the battle. There are many things like this because they have been treated with that degree of indignity.

This unconditionality of love is the centrality of our pedagogy. You cannot love them as much as you love your own child but you have to love them in the same way. Our children know – and we knew when we were growing up – that whether they are good or bad, whatever they do, their parents won't lose faith in them, they won't turn them out into the streets, won't stop wanting the best for them. When they turn 18, their parents won't say, "Our project funding is over so please fend for yourself." That unconditional love is something that I feel our teachers have learnt, and that is what makes them such wonderful teachers. People can't believe that 95-97 per cent of our kids actually give up drugs with no medical intervention, only a loving environment.

When we initially brought them in we had to negotiate with them on the streets for a long time. They have to willingly come because these are open rooms. Once they came in, I thought we would have to persuade them to get into school. But they want to go to school. What Anjali said about school, what actually happens, and what Shivani said, is absolutely true. But they still long to be in school. I often feel that it is the idea of being in school that gives them a sense of equality and inclusion, and not what is actually transacted, which is often pretty harmful and so you have to make up for it. But wearing a uniform, going to school (seem to be what gives them confidence).

We brought children from an elite school and these kids together. It was interesting when they compared what they loved most and hated most, which was one of the exercises. What the kids from the elite school hated most was going to school. But our kids said what they loved most was going to school.

The second thing we learnt was, if they have homeless parents, we must have unconditional respect for their parents. They are very sensitive to your treating their parents well. When you call them every month, you treat them exactly as you would any other parent.

She may be a lame beggar or a homeless mother, but she is fully respected – she recognizes it and the children recognize it. It gives them a sense of worth.

These are all political in the broader sense, not pedagogic. But without these, no pedagogy would have worked. I want to reinforce that.

The second big question about structures versus content, I will try to answer partly. Whether we are in the system or outside, I think that for the scale that we need, we have to work with the system. There are 50,000 street kids in Delhi, just to give one example. It requires 500 residential schools if they have to be taken care of. There is no way any kind of NGO intervention could reach that scale, nor should it try to.

With regard to the real estate problem you were talking about, 200 municipal schools in Delhi are ready for closure and the real estate lobby is looking at them. I repeatedly suggested that they be converted into residential schools. You could have a hundred kids in each of these; enrolment will be high. The structure will remain within the public school system. But somebody wants to start a computer centre – ministers, MLAs, real estate people, all want it. But the state has to be brought in to provide resources and scale.

This business about egalitarian compassion I don't see as something mainstream, although you find remarkable developments. Some regular schools treat children really well, have teachers really committed to them. So I am not writing them off. But a lot of that transaction has to be conducted by the non-state. So I think it is the role of both. Alliances with progressive people within the system is also what we are talking about.

Shivani: If school spaces could use the informal knowledge that children and communities have, that is the best thing because they do have a lot of knowledge. You are right on that point. It is not that these two things have to be so divided. That is what we all are trying to do, and which is what policies also talk about. But it doesn't happen on the field.

What Usha was saying about the three R's... We need to take our discussions to another level because we are so stuck at that point. If you have children coming for one year regularly and you have teachers working with children, it will work. But it is not working because the teachers don't work with children at that level. But what after that? If we are talking about 12 years, we have

to make those years meaningful. A lot of our arguments then go into specific streams of knowledge, or into literacy. But nothing pitches on the politics of education or the transformation of education. If our energies go there, they will lead to a higher dialogue.

Shubhra: This is in response to Simantini's question about the common-school system. I also believe that RTE without a common-school system doesn't make sense, nor does talking equity. But I don't know whether we can go back in time or whether we have missed the turn. Someone pointed out that there was an exodus of the middle class in the mid-1980s, and that was the turning point. I don't have any answers but this keeps worrying me.

Simantini: Society today is divided even geographically. The social geography is a very complex space. At the same time, none of us can immediately eliminate the caste system and gender inequity. But you believe in wanting to do that, in many ways. If your belief system itself is compromised, then obviously, the goals are going to be extremely difficult. I don't think one can ever reach a goal like that. We can hobble our way around for ever and ever. What we conceive as good education here may not ever be possible because it is highly stratified. And we have taken it for granted that we are powerless to challenge that.

In terms of transformative content, obviously you can have that at the NCF level. That's the solution to give you that support. Unless that is played out in the classrooms through people's lives, it is not going to remain the way the vibrancy of it will demand. Everybody has to unlearn – even teachers and people who come from marginalized communities will have to unlearn and re-look at the belief systems they have grown up with. That is a challenge that can unfold only in a place where there is a mix of people. A few places at least have it to some degree – the Kendriya Vidyalayas, the Navodayas. Teachers send their children to the same schools that they teach. So it is not rocket science.

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"Whatever our views on private schools, India definitely needs a strong, robust, working, equitable public education system."
- Anand Swaminathan

The 15th Wipro Partners' Forum, held in April 2015, reflected this conviction and revolved around the following ideas or questions: What does effectiveness in systemic interventions or reform in public education mean? What could the different models of such interventions be? What makes such an intervention effective (or not)? What role does civil society organizations play and what could they play in this process? This publication is an attempt to share these conversations with a larger audience.