Pursuing the Elusive Goal of Systemic Change
in School Education

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Eklavya was founded on the principle of building and testing models of educational change for macro level implementation. This was to be a combination of two opposing principles— of small experiments at local levels by 'voluntary efforts' and implementing 'schemes' over large geographies with the help of state structures. In other words, this also meant service provision to a small population and systemic change reaching in principle to all parts of a state. The object of this intervention was to create a model for meaningful 'activity-based, environment-based, inquiry-based' education. A subtext of democratisation was always present, of involving teachers and students in the process, and decentralisation of planning, decision making, review, financial powers and implementation.

The founders of Eklavya were well aware of the tension between micro level experiment and macro level implementation, between civic voluntarism and state enterprise. The foundation document, significantly entitled 'Evolving Systems for the introduction and diffusion of Educational innovations -Micro-level Experiments to Macro-level Action,' (1982) had the following to say:

Perhaps the only meaningful innovations have been the ones tried by certain voluntary groups from time to time. For obvious reasons, these groups have the ability to attract motivated and creative persons and provide them with adequate freedom to experiment and innovate. However, the failure of these voluntary attempts to create a significant dent in the system illustrates the second aspect of the problem, i.e. the identification of structures and processes that can diffuse Micro-Level Innovations, while sustaining quality, into Macro-Level action programmes. In the absence of such structures, all high quality Micro-Level innovations remain scattered and unconnected.… Hence, the utilization of wider existing structures and networks for the purpose of diffusion becomes critical.[1]

This was an age when the corporate houses and the market investment in education were kept at bay. So, the 'structures and networks' that could be identified were state structures and institutions. The document further held out the hope of a meaningful partnership between state and 'voluntary' efforts:

Joint ventures involving voluntary agencies and the Government are suitable set-ups for introducing such innovations. Such combined set-ups provide the academic freedom and flexibility normally absent in rigid Governmental systems, without which it is virtually impossible to create and test innovations. On the other hand, the availability of Government structures and administrative machinery ensures the implementation of such ideas so that they do not remain as mere laboratory endeavors.[2]

Within the government system special hopes were pinned on school teachers and the possibility of them fuelling the turnaround of the formal education system. Nearly four decades down the line, it may be instructive to reflect on this strategy. This not only means a simplistic account of what was achieved and what was not, but also to interrogate the very idea of 'systemic change'.

In one of his addresses to the General Council of the 'First International', Marx is reported to have posed the following paradox and also suggested a working solution to it:

On the one hand a change of social circumstances was required to establish a proper system of education, on the other hand a proper system of education was required to bring about a change of social circumstances; we must therefore commence where we were.[3]

Systemic change in education and social order appear to have a Luckhnowi relation of '*pahle aap*'. The chequered history of Soviet Education after the 'change of social

circumstances' seems to reinforce the paradox for the change in education system (certainly in its curricular and pedagogic aspects) did not come easily after the revolution. Indeed, promoters of change like Anatoly Lunacharsky and Nadezhda Krupskaya were greatly disappointed to see themselves marginalised and their pet ideas abandoned. Perhaps a similar fate awaited John Dewey who was invited to design the new education system of a secular and democratic Turkey after Mustafa Kemal Ata Turk's revolution. Nearer home the momentous Gandhian Basic Education met with a similar fate in the first decades of independent India.

Eklavya's engagement with 'systemic change' *prior* to 'change of social circumstances' thus merits some serious consideration. The engagement with the larger system was underwritten by the fact that the document cited above was discussed in a meeting called by the Planning Commission of India and attended by several central and state government agencies which agreed to support Eklavya in its efforts. This included funding by Department of Science and Technology and the Madhya Pradesh (MP) government, permission to work with government schools of MP by its education department, logistical support by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and not the least, the University Grant Commission (UGC) sponsoring university academics to work on the project. Thus, at least on the face of it, the presiding forces of the system were endorsing the change.

The idea of micro-level 'field testing' for macro-level implementation required that the 'pilot' schools chosen should not be handpicked for being special but for being normal as any other school. Thus, the student population as well as the teachers covered would represent the broad spectrum of schools in the MP state. This would enable the programme to strike a middle path, tempered by the views and constrictions of both those enthusiastic about the change or lukewarm or downright opposed to it. It was to be a negotiation between these diverse strands. The Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme (HSTP), was thus tried out in 16 schools in two different blocks of Hoshangabad district and eventually extended to the entire district.

The HSTP, which was to be the flagship of change had been developed through the collaborative efforts of Kishore Bharati, Friends Rural Centre, Delhi University science departments and scientists drawn from other institutions. In fact, this broad-based collaboration of professional scientists was part of the design to ensure broad consensus within the scientific community, another actor in the 'system'. In addition, the two non-government organisations based in Hoshangabad district drew in a cross section of school teachers and college teachers to act as part of the conceptualising team.

The HSTP was designed as a composite programme, which included changing of text books, class room practices, examination system, teacher training, school follow-up, monthly meeting of teachers, periodic replenishment of science kit and six-monthly meetings of 'Sanchalan Samiti' for review and planning. Systemic change after all could not be piecemeal, but a 'package'. Each of these components were documented and appropriate orders were issued by the government secretariat. During the course of the programme, all these were made part of a comprehensive 'Manual of Administration' duly issued under the sign and seal of the secretary, School Education. Thus, the elements of change were implanted deeply within the system and duly stitched. To further confirm the systemic nature of the change, all schools of a district, whether government or private were to be covered by the programme.

However, like the heart of the giants of fairy tales, the engine that drove the entire package of innovation lay outside the government system, in Eklavya. And this was not by accident or default. It was essential to ensure that the programme did not suffer from the fate of most other government programmes, short-term focussed implementation followed by abandonment of the programme, amnesia and erasure of memories. In the 1980s the bureaucracy had reached the apogee of inefficiency, where every routine bureaucratic job had to be coaxed and done with external push. Nevertheless, the question remained as to how could the change be systemic if its driving force was outside of the system? Conversely, could change work if its engine was located within the system and susceptible to its normal functioning? The programme was actually bogged down by a malfunctioning school system – very high student-teacher ratio almost nearing 80 to 100 students per teacher; poor replenishment of science kit; rapid decline of teaching standards and reduction of the exam system into a farce; middle schools facing the learning deficit of students coming from primary classes. The problem of systemic inefficiency thus could only be partially handled by placing the engine outside of it. This could not address the larger issues like those listed above or those relating to social exclusion based on gender, class, caste and tribe.

A second critical weakness of the programme was the very slow pace of 'scaling'. The programme was seeded in 16 schools in 1972, it was implemented in all schools of Hoshangabad district in 1979, it was further seeded in dozen or so schools in several 'divisions' in 1985-89. Scaling was also to be lateral, into other middle school subjects like the Social Sciences, and into primary and secondary levels. The HSTP was focussed on science in classes vi to viii. Micro-level model building for primary

school curriculum and middle school social sciences had been completed by 1990 and had worked well in the pilot schools. Thus, proposals were drafted for 'state-level' implementation of all the programmes in the early 1990s. The 1990s were also the years when the state experimented with 'decentralisation' in the form of the Panchayati Raj. Faced with the corrosive influence of globalisation, the state had to invoke popular mandate in a number of ways including devolution of limited powers to Panchayati Raj Institutions, generation of mass movements like the Ram Janmabhoomi or Mandal movements. The state governments used this moment to seek popular opinion on curriculum and often found such opinion supporting fairly regressive models. This added a new dimension to 'systemic change'. Popular opinion building through media campaign and participating in networks of middle class opinion builders became a component of the 'system'. In some ways this became synonymous with popular approval and acceptance. Most of these networks, themselves lacking the requisite understanding, fell upon 'what happens elsewhere' especially in the newly emerging elite private schools and in the NCERT (which was the 'national level').

Understandably, the early 1990s marks a watershed that transformed the nature of Indian polity and state. The realm of education witnessed a paradoxical shift. On the one hand the state actively cut down its expenditure and promoted privatisation and on the other hand it became hyper active on two fronts – to bring in children hitherto outside the pale of formal education into the schools on a war footing and promote 'joyful learning' in the class rooms. The education sector was opened up for international funding and hence to international experts and monitoring. All this led to informalisation of teaching profession, privatisation of schools and poorly funded 'schoolets' for the poor and the marginalised and also to transformation of curriculum and class room practices. The spearhead of this transformation was the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP).

While the state government put the proposals for scaling up the middle school science and social science programmes in the back burner, it invited Eklavya to join in the exercise of developing a state level curricular package for primary classes. A collaborative effort of MP State Council of Education Research and Training (SCERT), UNICEF and Eklavya, it proved to be an exciting break from the conventional curriculum and also curriculum framing processes. It was meant for the entire state and indeed, was implemented across the state. It was broad based, in that it incorporated the ideas and requirements identified by a diverse resource group of experts and teachers and administrators. It was approved by a Steering Committee consisting of national experts. The resultant curricular

package termed 'Seekhna Sikhana package' took the state school system by a storm and sought to transform the actual classroom practices of teachers. Massive orientation programmes and publication programme accompanied it. But within a couple of years even before the last round of books were ready, a reversal took place. The minister of education and the chief secretary replaced the Director of SCERT in an overnight move and called a halt to the entire programme. The new Director had a brief of dismantling the curricular changes. Eventually the state went back to ante-diluvian primary curriculum and text books.

Within a couple of years, by 2002 the HSTP was closed down along with the social science programme ostensibly on the plea of moving towards a uniform curriculum for the entire state and arguing that an experimental programme could not go on forever in a district or two. One of the main issues cited was the absence of 'popular support' for the programme among local elected representatives.[4] While it may be debated if this demand for popular support was a ploy or there was a real swell of public opinion against educational innovations, the fact remains that the perceptions of the middle class and its anxieties do have a palpable impact on curricular decisions of the state. Thus, the system which was initially defined as the state institutions and broad spectrum of academic and teaching community dissolves into amorphous 'public opinion'. Sociological imagination will perhaps help us to understand the deeper structures that underly what has been perceived as systemic – working of state bureaucracy, school system, academic community, public opinion – for the similarities between the 'failure' of Early Soviet experiments, Basic Education, HSTP, Lok Jumbish, are too uncanny to be accidental.

As it dawned in the late 1980s and early 1990s that the process of systemic change would not be a happy progression from 'micro to macro,' Eklavya began exploring other dimensions of change. One of the most appealing possibilities was 'idea level expansion' – broadcasting the new pedagogic and curricular ideas among activists across the country. These were also the heady days of the 'Total Literacy Campaigns' another of those ventures of partnership between civil society organisations like Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishad (KSSP), Bharath Gyan Vigyan Samiti (BGVS) and the state. These movements spawned organisations which found school education more attractive and they took to the ideas of Eklavya in a big way. This also created the ground for the DPEP collaboration between civil society organisations and the state departments in both curriculum development and implementation. As in Madhya Pradesh this greatly loosened the stranglehold of convention on curricular matters and spring-time of experiments swept the country. Eklavya and like-minded organisations participated in textbook development and

teacher orientation in several states. The prized resource was of course the large community of school teachers who had experienced new pedagogy and were committed to it. They travelled to different states to participate in workshops for text book development etc.

As the wave of DPEP subsided by 2002 a new process of churning began with the right-wing making inroads into curricular matters in NCERT and Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD). Three years later came the National Curriculum Framework 2005 (NCF) which squarely placed 'constructivism' and 'social constructivism' on national educational agenda. Somehow this seemed to gel with the emerging concern about bringing children of the most deprived and marginal sections to the school. The entire state machinery took up this task in earnest and sought to ensure universalisation of school access. Constructivist ideas about children's own knowledge base and motivation and broadening the goals of education, seemed to replace the older ideas driven by rote learning, drill, examination, detention and punishment. The NCERT and following it, the various state governments got busy producing text books supposedly based on constructivism. Eklavya and like-minded organisations once again found themselves in the midst of busy action assisting various governments in developing new text books to be used in all schools.

Ironically, the spirit of innovation appeared to ebb once the new textbooks were published, and the other components of the 'package' classroom processes, teacher orientation, decentralisation, etc. took a back seat. This meant that the new ideas were seldom implemented on the ground. Of course, a concerted attempt at evaluation reform was tried by replacing the formal examination system with Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE). The Right to Education (RTE) Act had mandated it in place of the older system of terminal examination and the practice of 'failing' students. The Act itself can be seen as an epitome of systemic change. A law ensuring universal and compulsory formal education for eight years, mandating some minimal standards for infrastructure of schools and maximalist standards for quality of teaching was passed some sixty years after Independence. The deadlines for implementing its provisions are still being extended ten years after its passing, and steps have been taken to amend some of the crucial provisions of the Act. Thus, a few years down the line we are witnessing a radical return to the old order. The clamour to narrow down the goals of education, restore rote learning, examination and detention is mounting and has almost been successful in a number of states. This appears to be backed by a consensus across political formations of left, right and the centre, ostensibly concerned by the falling standards of learning

in the school system.

On the one hand, the system appears to have had an uncanny ability to shake off in due course all innovations foisted on it and wipe out their memories. So much so that at the ground level, in ordinary schools, things appear more dismal than ever. On the other hand, there is a rich legacy of well documented ideas, practices, processes, and systems besides a very large and growing number of people and institutions that carry forward the task of educational change with a vision and capability. These interventions take multiple forms, of policy shaping, law making, litigation, curricular changes, text book drafting, teacher orientation, and on-site support in the schools by individuals, individuals situated within the formal school system, in corporate houses or their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, non-government organisations (NGOs) of various kinds etc.These result in continued contention and dialogue and frequently, ephemeral cooperation among the stakeholders. The larger system appears to absorb elements of change while resisting any real difference of substance. For example, the absorption of new text books without accompanying teacher orientation, class room practice or evaluation methods which characterises the NCF 2005 interventions.

There is then also a strange and paradoxical tendency within the state-run education system: towards creating micro worlds of ideal schooling. This began with the 1986 policy decision to create Navodaya schools in every district run by the central government, and various state governments have added their own version of such islands. These ostensibly have both a systemic purpose and a micro service perspective. They are simultaneously supposed to be 'pace setter' or 'model' schools and also to cater to the 'talented' children to be selected by examination. The non-government actors are also constantly pushed towards service delivery in small geographies or niches. However, the fact is that actual 'improvement' does not pass critical muster. It is not possible to really demonstrate 'real improvement in achievement levels'; we always end up arguing that things are not worse off or marginally better, or that we have achieved something not bargained for (i.e. 'children are more articulate' as if this happened because of the intervention). Isolated anecdotes and individual examples are held out as demonstration of change. Thus, the mirage of micro-level effectiveness reinforces macro-level ephemeralness of systemic change.The net result appears to be vibrant presence in the world of ideas, policies, in community of people but little on the ground level practice.

There appears to be larger, much larger, sociological historical processes at work which are pushing the 'system' to structure mass education in a particular way and

which use and discard these 'innovative' ideas, policies, practices and communities in their stride. Broadly, I would characterise this process as massive inclusion of the marginalised into the formal education system combined with intensive stratification and diversification of schooling. A society going through a massive process of dispossession and marginalisation requires mass schooling to sustain a semblance of equity. At the same time, the unprecedented rise of inequality leads to stratification and segmentation of schooling. This in effect dehomogenises the education system and thus, undermines one of the basic assumptions of our intervention. However, diversification of schools creates spaces where innovative ideas are welcome though not for mass of the children we had hoped to reach.

I would like to conclude this discussion by turning the gaze inwards – into our own naiveté and failings. In hind sight, one may argue that we began with simplistic notions of the 'system' and its workings. The group of well-meaning scientists or social scientists hoping to change the way the subjects were taught had probably little understanding of the sociological and even philosophical underpinnings of systems and change. They also understood little of how the state system worked and changed. The state they confronted was not static, but was constantly changing and itself responding to complex changes in society, economy and international settings. The nature of the state itself was undergoing a transformation at the turn of the millennium spurred by neo-liberal pressures. The gaze of the NGOs like Eklavya was often turned away from transformations taking place within the society: the hardening of competitive caste and communal identities, growing anxieties about employment in neo-liberal world where land and other traditional resources were vaporising, and parental anxieties about children in an age of open access through media, and the pressures they were exerting on the state. Funded neither by the education departments nor by mass subscription, the NGOs remain largely unaccountable both towards the state and the civil society. While this gives the necessary autonomy, it conversely undermines both the legitimacy and the perceptiveness of the NGOs. They can hence only act as limited catalysts of change but not engineer the change. That legitimately lies in the sphere of state and political action of civil society.

NOTES

1. 'Evolving Systems for the Introduction and Diffusion of Educational Innovations: Micro-level Experiments to Macro-level Action', Proposal for the creation of an Institute for Educational Research and Innovative Action in Madhya Pradesh, February, 1982, p.8, https://www.eklavya.in/pdfs/Books/HSTP/past_work/documents/evoling_systems_for_the_introduction.pdf (accessed on 27 May 2018).
2. Ibid. p.12.
3. Karl Marx, 'On General Education', from the Minutes of the General Council Meetings of August 10 and 17, 1869, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/iwma/documents/1869/education-speech.htm (accessed on 26 May 2018).
4. For detailed documentation of the closure of the programmes see, Eklavya Foundation New Beginnings, Bhopal, 2005.