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Working with the government: issues and perspectives

CONTENTS

Editorial

Reflections & Opinions

Resources and Reviews

Why we need to work with governments

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Governments across India constitute the most important players in the space of education. This is especially true in school education. They frame policies, run schools, administer teacher education institutions, and manage examination Boards. They also provide accreditation and funds, execute programs, and define the frames within which other stakeholders function in the domain.

For any organization or individual working in education, governments are a looming presence. Therefore, it is important to engage with them in a well thought out and effective manner. This is especially so in the present context, when the public education system is primarily catering to the marginalized sections of our society, with the upper and middle classes having effectively abandoned government schools for other alternatives.

If we want to reach children from the poorest of the poor families, then it is important that we engage with the government school system. Despite steep improvements in school enrolments over the last couple of decades, a large number of children are still unable to access schools. This is an area of lingering concern. NGOs are well placed to function as bridges between marginalized communities (such as seasonal migrants) from which these children come from, and the public education system.

Improvements in access have not uniformly transformed into gains in educational quality. By educational quality, we do not merely

refer to scholastic attainments of children. It also includes other equally important parameters such as inclusion, teachers' agency and freedom, students' and teachers' social-emotional learning, well-being and emotional growth, and equity in classrooms and the larger system. Some NGOs have done stellar work in experimenting and showing that scholastic attainments and equity go together. However, much work remains to be done to show that it is possible and desirable to do it at scale. The government school system provides the most relevant site to carry out this work.

There is also a need for focused work in many sub-thematic areas of education. This calls for collaborations between governments and civil society actors. One important example of this is the earlier neglected area of FLN. This is now an area of focus, following the importance it has been given by NEP 2020.

NGOs have valuable experience in running such programs. They also have important learnings of working with stakeholders from various government departments. Therefore, CSOs can play an important role in helping state governments think through programmatic and institutional interventions in rolling out FLN initiatives.

However, there is also the danger of CSOs becoming mere translators of governmental imperatives. Sometimes governmental initiatives are suboptimal and are founded on poor logic. A good example of this is the spate of school closures that have taken place in many states in India over the last few years. This process has often been based on faulty usage of indicators such as the Pupil Teacher Ratio (PTR). Organizations working in the space should play a constructive role by providing, and advocating for, better indicators to measure the adequacy of existing schools' and teachers' numbers.

This is just one example. The role of CSOs is not limited to executing governmental programs, and translating policies in the field. They must also have their ears on the ground, learn from the people, and try and make sure that elected governments listen to people's demands and respond to their needs. It is crtiical in an area as fraught with rapid change as education. This can only happen if CSOs working in education keep their houses in order, learn all the time, and experiment independently. They also need to build relationships with pro-people administrators inside the government, and function as parts/ nodes of larger networks and collectives of organizations and individuals.

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Changing contours of NGOs' engagements with governments for educational change

Rahul Mukhopadhyay

Plural histories of engagements between NGOs and the State

The relationship between the government and non-government organizations (NGOs) have taken on different forms across both time and space in the global South, though with some similar patterns among erstwhile colonized countries in South Asia. In India, the primary driver of post-independence planned economic development was the government. However, there was a significant presence of a large number of voluntary organizations. Many of these were driven by Gandhian principles of Swaraj – self-reliance through democratic decentralization. Examples of such organizations include Vidya Bhawan, Seva Mandir, SEWA, BAIF, etc. Government funds were channelized to these NGOs for "reaching the unreached" sections of the population, and for filling in gaps that the emergent post-Independent State found difficult to fulfil in areas of social welfare and development.

The dominant position of the government, in its relationship with NGOs, was called into question during the 1970s. In this period, the government's economic and social development policies failed to address issues of recurring natural calamities and widespread poverty. During this time, two broad approaches emerged from among civil society organizations (CSOs) to engage with the government, approaches that continued well into the 1980s and early 1990s.

The first approach, a more organizational welfarist one (e.g., Eklavya, Bodh Shiksha Samiti, Agragamee), focused on complementing or supplementing the role of the government in delivering public services such as education, health, and provisions of rural livelihoods. This was envisaged to be undertaken through more efficient grassroots-based delivery systems and contextualized adaptations of the government's mainstream models of service delivery. Examples of these in the domain of education include, alternative or non-formal education centres, curricular modifications, and localized teacher support.

The second approach was a more social movement oriented one. Examples of these included Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti, Kashtakari Sangathana, and The Timbaktu Collective. This approach focused on empowerment of people and public-service deliverers at the bottom-most rung of the bureaucratic hierarchy. Examples of this in the space of education included total literacy movement, work with village education committees, and work with community-based teachers.

These two approaches were not specific to education, and cut across different issues of social development. They can be seen as creating a dichotomy between what can be within the realm of economic and social development, in collaboration with the state, and what can take on a more political stance with a critique of the state and its policies and often not working in conjunction with government structures and institutions.

In education, National Policy on Education (1986), and the changing political-economic

reforms of the period, which included increase in international aid and funding to the education sector, large-scale programmatic interventions in specific relatively backward states with technical and financial support from international funding agencies, saw the government inviting NGOs to be part of different processes for the efficient implementation of their education initiatives (e.g., M.V. Foundation; Pratham-Mumbai Education Initiative).

Bridging the gaps between the State and the communities

The non-formal education program (NFE), initiated subsequent to NPE 1986, with the objective of providing education comparable to that of formal schooling to hitherto unreached populations, became a means of achieving access, without understanding the structural factors that led to many disadvantaged groups remaining outside formal schooling.

Three new models of delivery of education programs emerged from the NFE. First, collaboration of many small NGOs with the government and coordinated through an autonomous entity created within a government program. Second, collaboration between a larger (often high-profile) NGO and the government. And third, a government created special purpose vehicle (a para-statal project entity) for implementing education schemes.

With the rising influence of international aid and centrally sponsored schemes such as the District Primary Education Program in the late 1980s and 1990s, there was a significant increase in NGO initiatives tied up with these aided programs. The mandate of international conventions such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and Education for All (EFA), to which India became a signatory during this period, also meant that the government had to take recourse of these NGOs in achieving the goal of universalization of elementary education.

NGOs, even during this period, remained a complementary institutional resource for the State. They constituted a resource that could help the State fulfil its obligations of UEE. These could do so by helping the State reach difficult-to-access population groups, and historically disadvantaged communities, which had never received benefits of formal schooling.

However, this came with a paradox. NGOs, engaged with the government in areas where public school education was seen to likely require more support. However, these regions often had ambiguous, and not very positive experiences, of the effectiveness of these NGO—State engagements or their sustainability. At the same time, governments were reluctant to provide more leeway to NGOs in such collaborative arrangements. NGOs were being often compelled to work within restrictive parameters, financial and programmatic, decided by government norms.

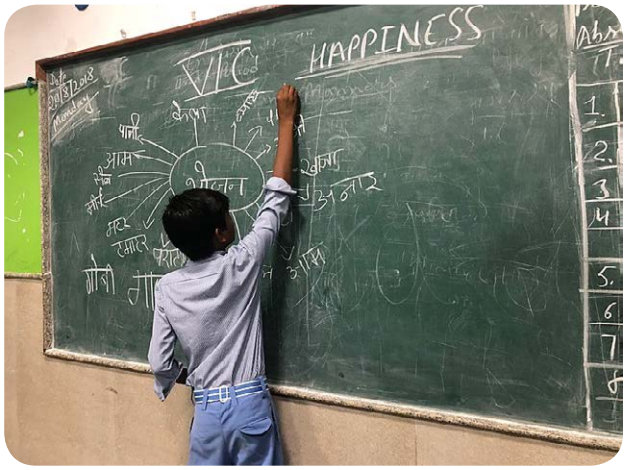
Changing roles of the state and NGOs in the 21st century

The paradigm of the government being conservative about NGOs' role in the direct provisioning of school education, and its various components, lessened considerably over the first decade of this century. A lesser role of the State in financing, management and regulation of school education went hand-in-hand with the ideas of New Public Management about the role of the State in public service delivery gaining ground in planning documents. Since the Tenth Five Year Plan, public-private partnerships (PPPs) started gaining more focus in the domain of education, along with privatization.

The twin ideas of State's failure in providing effective governance, and that of corporate entities being able to provide more efficient and effective management of resources towards quality education can be seen in the rising influence of PPPs in education. Concurrently, the NGO sector also underwent a noticeable transformation. Many new organizations in the sector have been set up by professionals from the business sector, and through investments of philanthropic capital from the corporate sector.

In more recent years, a large array of non-state actors has emerged. These have adopted hybrid strategies, in terms of both funding and intended objectives. Larger non-state actors, engaging with the State in diverse ways, include private foundations (e.g., independent, family, corporate and privately funded community foundations), corporate social responsibility (CSR) units, social innovation funders, impact investors, social enterprise organizations, etc.

The engagement of these actors with the government are varied. These include direct interventions such as strategic partnerships with the government in specific domains of



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school education. Examples of these involve teacher professional development, school leadership, curriculum development, and education leadership. Other engagements involve direct implementation of clustered development approaches for holistic transformation in government-identified districts deserving special attention. Some of these non-state partners follow a consortium-based approach. They often work on specific components through MoUs with interested state governments.

In the same vein, these non-state actors have come to adopt a wide array of indirect partnership with governments. These include partnerships with lead/associate NGOs in specific geographies that may adopt a sub-domain focused approach or a multi-sectoral approach. Other partnerships involve fellowship programs to incubate new organizations in geographies and/or sub-domains of need. Sometimes these are also tied to CSR strategies, e.g., serving neighbouring disadvantaged groups. Some of these relationships take the form of grants to NGOs working on issues of access, systemic reforms and particular areas of interest and need.

Emergent contours of State-NGO relationship in education

What then are the broad changes that we see in NGO—State engagement over the years? First, instead of approaches focused primarily on access for children outside formal school systems and that too mainly in rural areas, the new NGO—State engagements have turned their attention to various sub-domains of education. Examples of these include curriculum and textbook development, assessments, education leadership, inclusive education, and teacher training – across subject areas and different pedagogical approaches.

Second, the idea of quality in education, as measured by student learning outcomes, has superseded ideas of quantity (access, inputs) and equality (forms of education provisioning that can account for different disadvantages). This, probably, has acquired a path-dependency arising out of two broader factors. The first one relates to a continuation of a stratified schooling system that has been further stratified, over the years, among both government and private schools. The second involves global policy discourses that have foregrounded learning outcomes as a fundamental measure of educational achievement in the school system.

Third, the social sector ecosystem has changed from one that predominantly focused on efficient delivery of schooling and related services at the grassroots level, to one of a hybrid range of organizations that work with the State at different levels. These tend to follow an approach that is either top-down and scaled up, or bottom-up and geographically contained.

The engagements with the State in such an ecosystem, and for the former approaches, depend on various factors. These include political will of the concerned government to work with non-state actors, partnerships that NGOs can forge with international funding agencies and UN bodies, larger NGOs or philanthropies, and NGOs' ability to mark out a niche area of expertise-driven engagement that is concurrent with ongoing policy-push.

In comparison, smaller NGOs that resort to more bottom-up approaches, are dependent more on discretionary powers of local-level bureaucrats and their perceived sense of merit in the interventions proposed.

There have been numerous policies and programs for educational change over the post-Independence years, and particularly so in recent decades. Despite these, both the State and non-state actors have realized how difficult it is to bring about even micro-changes in a public school education system. It must be noted that this system is both large and characterized by multiple diversities – social, regional, economic, cultural and political.

The concurrent reluctance of governments, both at the centre and in the states, to allocate substantive portions of their budget for school education, has also acted as a strong deterrent to well-meaning policies being realized during their implementation. Policy makers, educationists and practitioners have also underscored the lack of suitable accountability mechanisms within the education administration system.

Consequently, the importance of the role of a variety of non-state actors, including NGOs, can be said to have increased with each passing year, rather than having decreased. At the current juncture, the National Education Policy 2020, the new National Curriculum Frameworks, and the changes emerging from these at both the levels of the central government and state governments, also provide for CSOs in education a wide spectrum of opportunities to collaborate with the State.

Current challenges in CSO – government collaborations

- Tightening of regulatory and compliance requirements.
- Weighed in favour of consortium-based or large CSO dependent scaling-up approaches, possibility of innovative and more grounded work ceding space to the former.
- High dependence on large-scale assessments for evaluation of change; possibility of overlooking process changes and evaluation of program designs.
- Reluctance of most governments to invest resources and initiate/assume systemic accountability; proclivity to generate resources and initiate accountability through para-statal mechanisms.

In conclusion

It is evident that the nature of NGO—State engagement has changed considerably across the immediate post-Independence decades to more recent times. The nature of the State itself has played a significant role. It is now seen to be more willing to be open to large-scale systemic interventions that can bring in innovations and educational change through the engagement of non-State actors.

On a more cautious note, one should also be watchful of how public funding for education is enhanced through such a role of the State. It must not become a route for further privatization of school education or a rollback of the State in terms of its primary role as provider, funder, and regulator of school education.

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Working with the government for educational change

Rizwan Ahmed

Gubbachi's stated vision is a world where every child develops their potential to lead a dignified life. In this is encompassed the dignity of every individual in the child's life as well - their family and their communities. We understand dignity as the ability of an individual to be an equal part of society, and, therefore, to have a voice—a voice that can articulate needs and aspirations without fear. The dignity of a child is the fulcrum on which all decisions pertaining to our work in education rests.

Gubbachi entered the space of education for the marginalized out of school child in 2015. We saw that the problem was dire and time sensitive, as our surveys of the migrant labour settlements in the chosen area (Bengaluru peri-urban) revealed that every migrant labour settlement there had significant numbers of children. These were from families that had come from both inside and outside the state. The children were out of school and unable to access any school.

We decided to design an education intervention for the Out of School Child (OOSC). This was envisaged to allow children from migrant families to go to school in the city, and learn like any other child. We identified sibling care as one of the barriers for an older child to attend school. Therefore, we set up a bridge program with an Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) component. The curriculum sought to bring children up to speed in literacy and numeracy. The goal was also to help them integrate into a mainstream classroom of a government school by the end of a roughly one-year program.

Gubachi

A bottoms-up approach

Our strategy was explicitly to work with the public system. We felt that it was the public education system that would be sustainable for this child in the long run, no matter wherever the family moves to. We chose a bottoms-up approach. We felt that this would be the quickest path, and would also get traction with the players on the ground.

Our work started with the Cluster Resource Person (CRP) and headmaster (HM) of the chosen school – Kodathi GHPS – our host school. The issue of the OoSC was in sync with the Department of Education (DoE) directives and the Right to Education Act (RtE Act). These talk about integrating the OoSC into schools. The system recognized this as a critical issue. It also had a stated policy on this. However, it was clearly inadequate and put neither learning nor retention as a priority.

The acting HM of Kodathi was supportive and gave us access to rooms and mid-day meals for the children in our bridge program. Most importantly, the migrant child was accepted on the school premises. This was a huge step towards restoring dignity to the family.

While the school was accepting, as an NGO our credibility came into question with some families of children, or contractors (as stakeholders). When these challenges were shared after a year, with the Block Resource Coordinator (BRC) and the CRP, they gave us an ear. They also joined us on the field to speak to the communities and other stakeholders. It was a small win for us, as we felt that the functionaries were in our corner. We felt that a year's work had not entirely gone unrecognized. We had hope.

Win-win works

Teacher shortage is a reality in Karnataka. In the Doddakannelli cluster where we work currently, there is a 48% shortage in the strength of teachers required. When our first batch of children "graduated" from our bridge program in 2016, we found that our host school was no exception to the problem. Only mainstreaming was not adequate, when the school did not have adequate number of teachers to teach.

Enrolment in Gubbachi Transform— Nali Kali classrooms (grades 1 to 3)
(In Government Higher Primary Schools in Bengaluru, and Chennagiri in Davangere district)

GHPS - Start Year of Intervention (% Increase)	Start Year	Current Year 2023
Kodathi - 2016 (476.67%)	30	173
A Krishnappa Nagara - 2019 (34.29%)	70	94
Mulluru - 2020 (%142.86)	49	119
Chennagiri - 2021 (%152.63)	19	48
Doddakannelli - 2021 (%31.25)	128	168
Kaikondrahalli - 2022 (%10.11)	89	98
Harluru - 2022 (%29.07)	86	111
Panathur - 2023 (%60.00)	60	96

After conversations with the HM and the school's teachers, the writing on the wall was clear. We had to enter Grades 1-2-3, which we did. This also sat well with our central focus of foundational literacy and numeracy for all children. By converting a challenge felt by the school into a workable intervention we moved toward a win-win situation.

The CRP soon urged us to work with the government designed Nali Kali, Multi-Grade-Multi-Level, activity–based curriculum. This was originally designed to meet the educational needs of a migrant child. We reached out to Azim Premji Foundation, Yadgir. It already had master trainers working with government teachers on the Nali Kali method. Two of our teachers, along with some of the founders, attended a training session in Yadgir.

Proof of the pudding (concept)

Our twin approach in the Kodathi GHPS – of a bridge program (with an ECCE component) along with a conduit to a strong Nali Kali approach, was by now operational in two schools in the cluster – Kodathi and Sulikunte (2017) This got noticed in the cluster and the block. The enrolments in these two schools had increased significantly in the two years of our intervention.

Retention of out of school migrant children after two years was also above 70%. The Block Education Officer (BEO) invited us to present the intervention and its challenges. He requested us to expand our Nali Kali intervention to other under-resourced schools in the cluster.

After more than two (2) years of our intervention, we met the DDPI and the SSA Project Director. We shared our outcomes and challenges, like inadequate classrooms for the growing numbers.

He presented the state education data with regards to schools, children and teachers and the inability of the Department to get into micro level issues (even though they were a direct result of macro policies – teacher shortage due to lack of adequate education budgets). By now we were well on a path of expanding our program to wherever there was a need in the cluster.

The family is our key beneficiary

Currently we run 23 Nali Kali classrooms across nine (9) government schools and three (3) bridge learning centres with preschool programs. There is also a School Adoption Program working in Kodathi, which was where it all started. All this has been possible because the families have felt our programs' positive impact on their children, and have experienced legitimacy and dignity.

Our community program, Gubbachi Enable, works with the Health Department, Department of Women and Child Welfare, Labour Department, the local panchayat and other local governance bodies. It is an enabler that works with the other crucial half of the education equation – the families and their

Gubachi

demand for Education. As families feel more empowered, they can engage better with the idea of education for their child.

Where policies fail the children

By 2018, we had also started education interventions for the pre-adolescent dropouts aged 10-14 years in Kannada and English medium. The out of school numbers in this age group were even more alarming.

According to DISE-2021 data, 14.7% of children drop out before secondary education. This is not including children in the age group who are currently out of school. This is a vulnerable age group where disaster is never too far away - close to dropping out, falling into negative social patterns, and getting into exploitative informal sectors.

We also knew well that it is this group that has the greatest potential to become a role model to younger children in the same communities. They can potentially help move the needle of change to a multiplier effect. However, there is no targeted policy to address this issue.

The policy also does not respond to the educational needs of an adolescent migrant child from out-of-state. These children often do not have the language skills to pick up the pieces in a government school.

Thus, starting as a very small but significant pilot program, the spin off program is now moving 160 children in the age group of 10-18 years towards Grade 10 certification, across two locations.

Another challenge we face is that of enrolments. The Supreme Court directive is clear that no child can be denied admissions for want of an identity document. In reality, however, HMs do not admit a child without an Aadhar Card. There are various reasons for a child not having an Aadhar Card. Denying admission based on this is against the Right to Education Act and is questionable.

The STS system assumes an Aadhar Card preventing the HM from completing the process. It is easier then, to circumvent the problem by not admitting a child! This is a matter of grave concern and an injustice to any child who is denied access to education on weak procedural grounds. Policies do not reflect ground realities; often ignoring or denying them. This then becomes a barrier to the implementation of programs on ground in their true spirit.

What of standards and regulation?

Government schools serve as a honey pot for well-intentioned agencies and individuals wanting to “do good.” However, when not thought-through, these can come at a huge cost.

In many schools, toilet blocks have been built with inadequate/no water supply or cleaning support. Shouldn’t have water supply and hygiene factors been parts of the toilet building plan?

Likewise, computer labs are set up with old desktops, no UPS supply, and no computer teacher support. And where there is a classroom shortage, an unused computer lab further exacerbates the space crunch. Shouldn’t the school or education department have minimal standards, like adequate classrooms for teaching, before allocating classrooms toward a computer lab with no computer teacher?

Another instance is when the Health Department comes in for a health screening with no prior intimation or planning. Measuring height, weight and temperature of children present on a particular day will not help identify any significant deficiencies or health issues. The impact of such an activity on the child’s development is questionable. What about the impact that such disruptions have on learning? Having children vaccinated without parental consent is a grave violation, which has happened in the recent past with Covid vaccinations.

Instances like the above make us think, if the right of the child to access equal opportunities for development is protected or even considered? Thoughtless disruptions to the functioning of a school have multiplier effects on the child, on learning, and on implementing teams like us.

Marketplace of NGOs in a school

Another negative fallout of allowing NGOs unregulated access, is the extent of duplication of efforts that regularly happens in a school as there are multiple uncoordinated actors. We are implementing an intervention that has recognition at the Block level. Our work is facilitated by an MOU. This document elaborates the focus, the objectives, and the activities of the intervention.

However, we have found duplication of similar activities in the same schools we work in by another organization with another MOU. This MoU has been signed at the state/district level. The HM is in a conundrum trying to balance out local interests and departmental directives from different levels (block, district and state). Most often, these clash with the needs on the ground.

We have seldom noticed any attempts at coherent communication between HMs and senior department officials where needs are discussed threadbare. In such a situation, we have also been called in to negotiate with other organizations, rather than the HM taking a decision on the matter. The perception that the HM cannot refuse is very strong.

Before an intervention is considered and brought on board, the school being a place for learning, clarity about the impact on learning at the level of the child, the mode of implementation, and resources being deployed, must be thought through. Are valid questions being asked of organizations by Department of Education before engaging with the intervention and signing an MoU?

Looking into the future

The bottoms-up approach of working with the teachers, the HMs, the CRP, and the BRC, has worked for us in bringing the school together. It has also allowed us to run our programs working toward upholding the dignity of the child.

There are spaces within the education department for translating good intent and of collaborations with NGOs and other stakeholders. Yet, there are bigger elephants in the room. These need to be addressed adequately for positive education change to happen.

Merely enrolling children is not adequate. Retention and positive learning outcomes, and the ability of an educated child to lead a meaningful and dignified life ought to be a common goal for everyone in this space.

This is the purpose of education. It is when every government official, and all the stakeholders share this belief that the change that we dream of will become a reality.

Rizwan Ahmed is the co-founder of Gubbachi, and the program lead of Gubbachi Enable (Community Empowerment and Health Initiatives). From being a financial analyst, questions of equity and community empowerment, drove Rizwan to pursue an MA in Development program at Azim Premji University. As a development practitioner, he first worked at a large NGO in implementing education projects at-scale in Karnataka across six (6) districts. In 2015, he co-founded Gubbachi Learning Community, an organization that works for the empowerment of migrant labour and the education of their children.

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Transforming public education through government partnerships

A reflection from Mantra4Change's journey of working with the government

Rucha Pande and Sushant Kumar

Introduction

The government is the primary provider of public education. It plays a critical role in shaping the education system. Despite significant progress in recent years, India still has millions of children who are out of school. According to a recent report (titled "State of the World's Children 2021") by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), there are approximately six (6) million children out of school in India. This represents about 2.8% of the global population of out-of-school children.

Additionally, many children drop out before completing their primary education. According to the 2021-22 Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) by Pratham, the dropout rate for children in the age group of 11-14 years in India is 13.2%. This means that 13.2% of children in this age group, who were enrolled in school in 2021, had dropped out by 2022.

Even children who are enrolled in school often do not receive a quality education. This is due to several factors. These include a shortage of qualified teachers, inadequate infrastructure, and a lack of focus on learning outcomes.

The situation becomes worse when children from marginalized groups, such as girls, children from lower castes, and children with disabilities, are disproportionately affected by the education crisis. Government of India is committed to improving education.

However, it cannot achieve these goals alone. The diversity, urgency and scale of the challenge are simply too great. Systemic transformation is essential to achieve the vision of quality education for all.

Mantra4Change's vision is to create an India where all children have access to quality education, regardless of their background or circumstances. We believe working with the government is critical in achieving this vision.

We have worked with governments in several states, including Karnataka, Punjab, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh. We have seen firsthand the power of CSO-government collaborations to solve complex educational challenges.

This essay will discuss the importance of CSO-government collaborations for educational change. It will draw on Mantra4Change's experience to illustrate how CSOs can work with the government to solve educational challenges and improve students' learning outcomes.

Working with the government

Working in collaboration with the government, particularly in a complex and diverse nation like India, holds significance for many reasons. First, the government serves as the principal provider of public education and is inherently positioned to transform the education system. It wields the power to enact policies and initiatives.

Mantra4Change

Signing an MoU with Government of Odisha, to create a Special Purpose Vehicle to enrich children's learning.

This makes it an indispensable partner in efforts for systemic reforms. The formal recognition within NEP 2020 magnifies the importance of engaging with the government in discussions and actions to improve education.

Moreover, collaborating with the government can significantly amplify the reach and impact of any initiative. Governments possess the expansive infrastructure and resources necessary to influence the lives of millions.

According to Ministry of Education, Government of India, in 2022 there are 10.2 million government schools in the country, catering to over 250 million children.

Furthermore, addressing the education crisis in India necessitates a holistic and multifaceted approach. CSOs alone may lack the capacity to address the diverse range of challenges that hinder quality education. These challenges include inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, and learning outcome deficits. Working with the government provides access to the scale, resources, and policy-making influence needed to tackle these multifaceted issues comprehensively.

Government of India's commitment to improving education, as evidenced by its focus on foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN), 21st-century skills, vocational training, etc., opens avenues for CSOs to complement these priorities and offer innovative, context-specific solutions.

By fostering collaboration, building trust, and aligning with governmental goals, CSOs can drive systemic transformation and advance the vision of quality education for all, regardless of background or circumstances.

Through our experience in Mantra4Change's initiatives across several Indian states, we have seen how collaborative efforts with the

The Punjab story of government partnership

The debut: In July 2019, four organizations, Sanjhi Sikhiya, ShikshaLokam, Mantra4Change & Samarthya, collectively approached the Department of School Education, Punjab, with an aim to contribute to the education system and a passion for supporting Punjab as a state. They did not go in with ready-to-implement plans.

Rather, they went in with curiosity to learn, experiences to build on, and a willingness to co-create with the government. Fortuitously, they were met with the same energy. "Study the department and the schools first, then come in with a plan," was the response they first got on approaching department officials.

Added to this was another key piece of advice that informed the design and work from then to date. The recommendation was to focus on "+1" or incremental improvements in the existing system, which make a big difference in the long run.

The study: The collective followed the advice and did just that. They spent the initial weeks understanding the strengths, challenges and realities of state-level actors and initiatives and school-level challenges. The study helped discover great assets that the public school system already had. These includes policies, people, and innovative structures. The study also helped in identifying underlying challenges. These related to usage of technology, and focused capacity enhancement of leadership, etc.

The gallery walk: At the end of this period, the collective came up with a list of 25+ ideas, which were "+1" innovations. These were simple, yet powerful ideas for improving schools. Instead of going a traditional route, the collective shared these ideas through a gallery walk. Chart papers with drawings and post-it notes displayed the different ideas.

Officials were intrigued by this innovative approach. They walked from one corner of the room to another. They engaged with each new idea as they moved. Walking to ideas and looking at chart papers also gave a more welcoming space for officials to interact with and share their feedback on the ideas being shared. While the collective had hoped for a go-ahead on the top 4-5 ideas, they were told to pursue all of them! At the end of the meeting, the organizations received advice that they all keep close to their hearts to this day.

"There are already thousands of people in the department. We don't need you to become an extended arm. Instead, you need to be a catalyst. Support and motivate the existing people and systems to raise the bars of excellence".

Full speed ahead: Working toward all of this was a big challenge. It required all the four organizations to come together and work toward a common goal. These CSOs took on the challenge. They agreed to come together with the education department. Together they formed the Punjab Education Collective in August 2019.

The objective was to transform the public education system of Punjab by identifying challenges faced by the stakeholders on the ground. A related goal was to co-create solutions with the state education department to address them. The overall aim was to improve the health of the education system.

Cut to December 2022, The Punjab Education Collective received "The Collective Social Innovation Award" from Schwab Foundation at World Economic Forum, for impacting 2.3 million students across 19,000 government schools in the state.

Mantra4Change

Dr Binodanand Jha (third from left), an advocate for the cause within the system.

government can produce tangible results in addressing complex educational challenges. Working with the government is a strategic choice for us. It is also a moral imperative for systemic transformation.

What we learned while working with the government

Know the actors: Understanding the intricacies of the hierarchical and multifaceted government system is important for CSOs for successful partnerships. It is important to identify the key actors.

However, it is essential to delve deeper into their roles, responsibilities, and the extent of their influence and functions within the system as well. Moreover, going beyond the surface level, and building genuine personal connections with these individuals is equally crucial.

Having kindness and empathy in these interactions is important. It is about recognizing that the people in the government are more than just state representatives. They are human beings operating within a complex system, possibly dealing with their own reservations and struggles. Building these genuine relationships is a key lesson we have gained from our experiences in collaborating with the government.

See the complete picture: Taking a holistic perspective is important when engaging with the government. While it is natural for CSOs to primarily focus on their specific programs and their successful implementation, it is crucial to acknowledge that the government operates within a much broader context.

Beyond program implementation, the government must have considerations that include familiarity with the allocated state budget, adherence to policy mandates, coordination with various institutions, and knowing the political will.

By adopting this comprehensive outlook, we have gained a deeper appreciation of the systemic landscape within which governments function.

Be in the background: In the five states we have worked in so far with the government system, we have always been in the background and played a supporting role. This has ensured that we are non-threatening to the government's visibility to the public.

Building relationships with key government officials within the system, who can advocate for your ideas, is also important. No matter how influential your organization is, there will come a time when you require the support of individuals within the system who share your vision and are willing to champion your ideas from within.

Know your role: A CSO might successfully establish a partnership with the government and yet not contribute meaningfully. Why does this happen? While there may also be other reasons, one main reason is not knowing our role as CSOs. Like any partnership, one should know what one's role is in the partnership. We have identified three critical roles that CSOs can play in a government partnership.

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Supporting governments in materializing 'Reading Campaigns'

Problem solver and innovator: CSOs are expected to actively bring innovative solutions and exemplify best practices that the government can adopt as models. The government often acknowledges, and sometimes implements, CSO-generated ideas or at least gives them due consideration.

Implementer: CSOs are seen as having the necessary manpower and resources to provide last-mile connectivity, where the government often falls short. CSOs' flexibility and experience in the field are thought to expedite the governance process, making implementation successful.

Translator: CSOs are also seen as translators. First, because CSOs work at local levels, some are seen as well-versed in local languages and able to deliver the government's message to the people more clearly than the government could (Syal, van Wessel and Sahoo, 2021). Second, CSOs are seen as intermediaries between the government and the people, providing two-way feedback.

Optimizing existing structures: Another thing that has worked for us is integrating and optimizing existing programs and structures rather than creating new ones. For example, suppose the government has an established 15-day in-service training for teachers. In that case, the more effective approach is to tailor your training to align with this existing framework, rather than suggesting a separate 20-day training program. This customization strategy and alignment with existing government initiatives ensures efficiency and minimizes duplication, ultimately enhancing the impact of collaborative efforts.

Government's priority is our priority: Over the past three years, state governments have made "foundational literacy and numeracy" a top priority. Consequently, our focus has been on introducing innovative and context-specific solutions to achieve this objective. Reading campaign in Punjab, Padhe-Bihar Badhe Bihar, etc., are our programs designed seeing the governments' priority. Governments have their own sets of goals and objectives. It can be difficult to get them to adopt new ideas or programs not aligned with their priorities. Understanding governments' priorities, and developing programs and solutions aligned with them, is important.

Designing for scale: What works at scale? Something that is easy, simple, achievable,

and can be easily contextualized. As an organization, we have been successful in scaling our micro-improvement projects in the states we work. Micro-improvements cater to the objective of making the improvement process easy, simple and achievable for every stakeholder in the system. It is an approach that helps the stakeholder to break down a big idea into clear actionable tasks and modify it to suit their context.

The frequent wins that we experience through micro-level changes in schools eventually feed into a continuous improvement cycle across the education system. Making micro improvements each day, repetitively, over a period of time will also lead to compounding growth. This can potentially create mega impact across the system that is visible. This can also motivate the stakeholders. Thus, it brings a huge opportunity to scale these small improvements for the larger system.

Design for sustainability: There is an advantage to the "slowness" of the govt system. It may not be quick to implement changes. That is something that we need to work *toward* as well (and not just challenge it!). In other words, we need to design in a way, so that new practices become the new status quo and are integrated into key structures and policies of the government.

For example, once teachers and leaders started becoming comfortable with using DIKSHA in Bihar, the department welcomed new programs leveraging DIKSHA. It also came up with ways to leverage the platform in other existing programs.

Challenges of working with the government

The system is slow: Working with the government for systemic transformation in India is a challenging task. The government, both at the central and state levels, is a large and complex bureaucracy. It has multiple stakeholders with their different interests. It can be difficult to navigate the system and get things done quickly. Additionally, the government often has a short attention span, wants to reduce duplication, has less appetite for risk, and has a higher certainty of success. This can make it difficult to implement and innovate any long-term solutions in a short period.

Data accessibility: An unavoidable challenge in collaborating with the government is the constrained accessibility of essential data. Many government agencies operate with vast data reserves. However, this resource often remains locked in silos. This makes it challenging to access and utilize data effectively. Additionally, the data may be scattered across various departments and institutions. This often results in a lack of cohesion.

Usability and visibility of data: Even when data is accessible, its usability can be hampered by inconsistent formats and a lack of standardization. Furthermore, there is often a need for more transparency and visibility regarding data dissemination. This hinders the government's internal operations, and limits the ability of external partners, such as CSOs, to leverage the data effectively. Gaining access to data is important for informed decision-making and implementing effective solutions. However, challenges surrounding data availability, usability and visibility pose substantial barriers to collaborations with governments.

Conclusion

Partnering with the government is not merely an option. It is a compelling imperative for systemic transformation in India's diverse education landscape. The government's unparalleled reach, resources, and policy-making authority make it an indispensable ally in addressing the system's multifaceted challenges. While working with the government presents its share of challenges, the potential for positive impact surpasses these hurdles. The government's commitment to improving education aligns with the aspirations of many CSOs like Mantra4Change, who strive to

Mantra4Change

A review meeting structure used in Tumkur, Karnataka last year, now scaled up at the state level

ensure quality education. By building trust, fostering collaboration, and complementing governmental efforts, CSOs can play an important role in driving systemic reform and expanding access to quality education throughout India.

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Connect on:

Delivering against the odds

Dr Rita Mishra

In a primary school in the village of Raisobha, in Bargarh district of Odisha, 45 young children sit in the scorching heat with one teacher trying to manage the class, while also ensuring that they learn something. This school lacks basic sanitation facilities, infrastructure, and a stimulating environment. Yet if one sits there among the children, one can't help but smile at their enthusiasm and infectious energy. Despite all the constraints, the children show up at school day after day, for the sense of community it provides and for their desire to learn something new.

Any reference to the public school system in Odisha starts with a discussion about its numerous shortcomings. While it is essential to address these, one must not lose sight of the fact that these spaces are still valuable institutions that have meaning to their stakeholders and harbour tremendous potential. We at Patang, are deeply concerned about the problems plaguing the education system in Odisha. However, we have consciously abandoned the deficit lens and looked at the opportunities to intervene and add value.

Patang, an organization based in Western Odisha, works with children, adolescents and youth to build leadership for social change. In this article, we elaborate on our holistic approach to working with the government school system. This piece illustrates the evolution of our collaborative partnership with the government. It also emphasizes that it has grown through both direct engagements with the system, and via community-led initiatives.

Supporting potential, not filling gaps

In 2003, we launched an innovative lifeskills program in the Odia language, a concept that was relatively unknown at the time. Government-run schools expressed willingness to integrate lifeskills education. However, they grappled with understanding its specific components and implications. Over the course of a decade, we diligently implemented the lifeskills program in the Sambalpur region, securing permissions from individual schools.

We subsequently conducted a comprehensive program evaluation. This evaluation inspired confidence within educational institutions. It also emphasized our growing expertise in this domain. Recognizing our expertise, the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan in Sambalpur approached us to expand the program to various other schools. We were duly compensated for our efforts by the government.

Notably, this marked the first instance where government officials at the district level proactively engaged with us. However, the initial phase of this journey was not without challenges. Our team members, being relatively young, faced scepticism from teachers, and were at times dismissed by the schools and officials. Yet, our perseverance and long-term vision enabled us to overcome these initial hurdles.

When we embarked on our work with schools in the curricular domain in the primary grades, we promptly recognized a substantial issue: linguistic exclusion. In the region where we operate, children's home languages are Sambalpuri, Munda, and others. The medium of instruction in the schools though is Odia.

We recognized the difficulties that teachers were facing due to this language barrier. This realization inspired us to delve into the Mother Tongue (MT)-based Multilingual Education (MLE) paradigm. Gradually, we

enhanced our capability to implement the MLE approach in schools. We did this by actively engaging both the community and teachers in this process.

However, getting into the school system was not easy. The process of getting permission was long and tedious. Once we received permission to work in the schools by an ADEO. However, the approval was revoked by the DEO. This prompted us to access the school system through the School Management Committee (SMC) route.

Our community-led approach enabled us to enter schools and work with children in remote areas. We began our efforts by developing the first set of storybooks in the Sambalpuri language, with significant community participation. Following this, we set up learning centers within the schools to demonstrate the applications of the MLE framework.

Looking at the young team of Patang, earlier DEO (Mr Sudesh, name changed) was quite critical and questioned our capacity to work with children. Once, he visited a school and found the approach and TLMs stimulating and innovative. That experience changed his thinking. The participatory materials, local stories and rhymes captured the teachers' attention. These ignited their curiosity and encouraged them to consider implementing the MLE framework officially.

Patang's strategy involves inviting educational officials such as BEOs and CRCs to witness activities, and co-design initiatives like language melas, math melas, and book fairs. This has significantly reinforced the confidence of these officials in our educational endeavours.

Mr Saroj Kumar Bhue, Block Education Officer (BEO), Bhatli, Bargarh, expressed his admiration after observing the impact of the language mela, highlighting it as an innovative initiative for children to learn multiple languages in an engaging and enjoyable manner. He recognized the mela as an opportunity to unite various stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and the community, for the holistic linguistic and educational development of children, while praising Patang as a valuable educational resource for the entire Block.

Similarly, Mr Sudhansu Sekhar Mishra, BEO, Bargarh block, visited Katapali and

Patang

Bahihata - local book fair

Community processes inspired confidence among government officials for our endeavours

We have strengthened our intervention by establishing School Management Committees (SMCs). We have also engaged students in these SMCs and bolstered the capacity of SMC members to address school development needs. This process has yielded significant success. In many schools, SMC members have played pivotal roles by facilitating the recruitment of community teachers to enhance the teacher-pupil ratio, allocating resources for infrastructure improvements like water and electricity connections, and advocating for support from district officials.

As a follow-up, we are organizing training sessions for these community and ad-hoc teachers. The goal is to equip them to fulfil their roles effectively. Building on the gains made on the ground is another critical strategy for us.

Patang believes in building youth leadership for social change. Young volunteers, who are enrolled in our youth program, form youth groups in the villages. These youth leaders collaborate with schools, teachers, and School Management Committees (SMCs) and organize events. This process instils a sense of ownership for the village school. Instead of assigning blame for the school's issues, they take responsibility for its state and recognize themselves as crucial stakeholders in its development. These volunteers further uplift school and teacher morale by organizing language melas (gatherings), book fairs, summer camps, children's clubs and festivals. These efforts have produced positive outcomes. For instance, children's attendance has increased in every school where we are involved. Youth groups have successfully reintegrated children who had dropped out due to caste-based discrimination. Many young volunteers have addressed caste-based discriminatory practices in schools by expressing their concerns to teachers and SMCs.

Canalapada schools and witnessed the classroom environment. He stated, "I got inspired by the classroom processes and learning environment of the schools Patang works in, and suggest all our schools' teachers from Bargarh Block to visit and learn on child-centric processes and classrooms."

Our process of engaging with officials at different levels and showcasing our methodologies through real-life events such as winter and summer learning festivals, sports events, school assemblies, library activities, etc., has played a major role in strengthening our relationship with the education system. These interactions have streamlined the approval processes, leading BEOs to authorize teachers' participation in Patang's various training programs, as needed.

Motilal Jhankar, the Cluster Coordinator at Nua Barngamal, was instrumental in engaging teachers in training and consultation activities. He obtained official permission to conduct a meeting at Kalpa School, made all the necessary arrangements, and actively facilitated teacher participation.

Gradually, we have started receiving invitations to engage in meetings and discussions concerning educational policies and practices. We have also been included in several district-level committees. Additionally, we have organized consultations involving various stakeholders to garner support and refine our perspective.

To emphasize our dedication to the cause, we invited Prof. Ajit Mohanty, a globally reputed intellectual, to provide training for government schoolteachers in Sambalpur and Bargarh districts. Dr Mohanty's insights reinforced the positive relationship between Mother Tongue-based Multilingual Education

Patang

Cluster-level TLM development workshop

(MLE) and academic achievement and cognitive growth.

Mr Radhakanta Chhatri, ADEO, Bargarh, actively participated in a day-long MLE consultation in Sambalpur. He encouraged teachers to implement the MLE approach. With time, the educational system has become more open to our pedagogical style, recognizing it as child-centered, promoting joyful learning, and emphasizing comprehension rather than rote memorization.

Presently, we operate ten learning centers within schools in Bargarh. These serve 200 primary-level children. Additionally, we are in the process of creating a Training of Trainers (ToT) Manual for Mother Tongue-based MLE for Sambalpuri-speaking children. Our intention is to offer this training to teachers in primary schools across various districts following the pilot implementation of the manual.

Collaborative engagement, not just extra hands

We, who collaborate with the school system, understand that our contributions are often perceived as mere supplementary assistance, rather than as partners working together to meet the larger vision of education. To address this challenge, we have implemented a three-pronged strategy. First, we have conducted teacher orientations in the schools where we operate. Second, we have clearly defined the roles of our organization and those played by the schools.

Third, we have gradually shifted toward a more teacher-led approach. For instance, we were particular about involving teachers during the development of teaching-learning material using cost-effective strategies, as well as during curriculum implementation and participatory activities. This strategy aims to ensure a smooth transition when we eventually step back.

We have conducted several workshops on designing Teaching-Learning Material (TLM), at the request of District Education Officers. Subsequently, schools have shown an interest in TLMs. While we have occasionally offered assistance, we have encouraged teachers to take the lead in creating these materials. This progression has been gradual, with our emphasis being on skill transfer and empowering teachers to be the principal drivers of change.

The Patang team also provides essential support to schools and teachers in executing important mandates. As part of the Education Department's "Surabhi Program," held in

schools to spotlight students' talents, we were invited to participate as judges for which our entire team took time out. It was a privilege to witness the remarkable journeys of our children and to encourage them. These efforts deepen relationships with the school system in local areas.

Short-term goals and long-term relationship

Our experience has taught us that engaging with the education system, whether through a top-down approach or a bottom-up one, requires a long-term outlook. A collaborative and demand-driven strategy is the most effective alternative in this context. This strategy focuses on empowering teachers to take the lead, instead of simply following directives coming from the state capital. This is important, because often they carry out activities as a matter of compliance, without fully internalizing the underlying objectives.

Through our process, teachers demonstrate receptiveness to interventions and tailor them to their specific needs. They do not perceive these as an additional burden. Introducing new ideas can pose challenges. However, evidence of practicality and effectiveness help to sway stakeholders.

For instance, initially, difficulties in accessing storybooks and TLMs affected the quality of teaching within classrooms. However, when we introduced creative methodologies, pragmatic activities, and resources through our teachers' training programs, teachers took to the concept enthusiastically, as they saw the merit in this pedagogy.

It is crucial to emphasize that while some interventions receive cooperation when tailored to specific needs, there are occasions when it becomes necessary to advocate for certain agendas. In one co-ed school, teachers traditionally adhered to segregated seating arrangements in the classroom. Our attempts to challenge this were initially met with resistance.

However, through consistent and positive engagement, the school's stakeholders have undergone a remarkable transformation in their attitude. They are now unconditionally sending students to our programs. They have even organized various gender sensitization initiatives, such as mixed-gender cricket matches within the school.

What we have learned from our experience is that approaching schools without well-laid-

What has worked for us

- Share relevant ideas, updates, research and innovations periodically with government officials
- Personalized messages for accomplishments
- Sharing photos, reports and case studies to showcase on government platforms
- Displaying materials on office notice boards and maintaining "partnership" files for reference
- Seeking inputs and suggestions for activities and training
- Two-way partnership: attending department's programs
- Appreciating efforts, through teacher recognition events and school felicitation ceremonies
- Engaging experts to bring new information and research to the district-level
- Collaborating with academics, researchers and policymakers to enhance education
- Involving district and block level administration, DEOs, and department officials in Patang's events and programs
- Facilitating stakeholder convergence through consultations
- Coordinating joint visits with department officials

out processes does not work. It is essential to monitor and track the progress of any initiative to ensure that it stays on the right path. In doing so, a concerted effort should be made to accumulate evidence that supports the effectiveness of the project.

This evidence can serve a dual purpose. First, to advocate for the continued success and expansion of the program. Second, to identify areas in which course correction might be needed.

Clear, well-defined processes help minimize disruption. These also motivate teachers and communities by ensuring that everyone understands their role and responsibilities in achieving the project's goals. These are the areas where we are currently placing an increased focus.

Conclusion

Collaborating with the public school system is an ongoing journey marked by its inherent bureaucratic complexities. Administrative demands often compel teachers to take on managerial roles. This limits the capacity to fully embrace their roles as educators. Given this backdrop, the perspective from which our interventions are executed assumes paramount significance.

It is incumbent upon our organization to consistently evaluate the value we bring to our partnership with the public education system. We have tried to devise strategies to ensure both successful delivery and sustained momentum over time. Despite the formidable challenges they face, schools in remote villages continue to play a pivotal and commendable role in Indian society, consistently defying the odds.

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Patang

BEO visit in a language mela

One size doesn't fit all

A practitioner's experience of inclusive classrooms

Chitra Shah

Integration of children with special needs

"Why don't you teach your children science?" – This question by Dr Judith Newman from the Early Child Care Program of University of Oregon, USA, in 2013 during her first visit to Satya Special School got me thinking. Satya Special School has been providing special education, including rehabilitation and therapy, to children with special needs (CWSNs) since 2003. While this was a pioneering effort in empowering CWSNs and changing the conversation around disability in the region, it still wasn't reflective of true inclusion.

Quite often, when I looked around our centres, I would ask myself, "Can we offer some of the children with mild and moderate Intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) formal mainstream education?"

Having read about the integration of Children with special needs (CWSNs) in high-end private schools in various metros, we were confident that we would succeed. We approached a few acquaintances who were heads of private schools in Puducherry.

We thought, given the simple hierarchy in most private schools, where the founder is generally the decision maker too, it would be easier to include CWSNs. To my disappointment, every school denied this request, stating that the other parents would raise concerns. With this avenue closed, we then focused our efforts on government-run schools.

Around this time, there was a lot of emphasis from the Central Government on Right to Education, Education for All and Integration of CWSNs in mainstream schools. Though Government of India had made it mandatory to include CWSNs, ground realities were very different.

I remember when I took a wheelchair user for admission, the headmaster of a rural government school took me to an already crowded classroom and asked me, "Where is the space for a wheelchair?" Indirectly, he was refusing admission. The government also saw inaccessibility and lack of disabled friendly infrastructure as a roadblock. It allocated a large portion of the budget for building ramps and accessible toilet facilities.

Engaging with the public education system

To justify the budget expenditure on infrastructure, the initial focus of the Government was on the enrolment of CWSNs - enrolment, not integration. In fact, I was asked by a senior official in the Education Department to simply enrol the CWSNs and ensure that they come to the school once a month for attendance. "They can still get an 8th std certificate, which would help them in future employment opportunities," he claimed.

Quite often the officials were happy to copy a model that has been implemented in the southern states. There was resistance and apprehension to adopt a new practice, as they felt it was highly risky and would lead to a negative consequence and political interference. Even if we were able to convince the field or mid-level officials, the decision-making process in the government is slow and cumbersome.

There are multiple layers of approval and lengthy procedures, which can delay the implementation of the incremental change. Officers are often transferred at the blink of an eye. Convincing the new incoming officer and repeating the entire procedure would leave us exhausted. However, we managed to hold on to the belief that it needs one nod, one person to accept the change.

The challenge for the government was not just about creating the right environment. It was also about changing teachers' mindsets. Even today, every time we meet a group of mainstream schoolteachers for an orientation and sensitization program, we get mixed responses. These range from a sympathetic teary-eyed teacher to a teacher who felt having a CWSN in the classroom would add to her work burden or a teacher who felt she lacked the competency to handle the child. There have been teachers who even asked, "Why should we integrate them, what can they do!!" So deeply entrenched was the societal bias against CWSNs that it had pervaded the sanctity of the classroom, where all are supposed to be equal.

Due to the lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic, Department of Education had organized several online workshops for providing insights and inputs to ensure CWSNs' inclusion. The Director of Education, Government of Puducherry, at the time - Mr Rudhra Goud - had clarity of thought about inclusion. He was also willing to go the extra mile to ensure that the inclusion of children with disabilities becomes a reality.

Making inclusive education work for CWSNs in government schools: the importance of bureaucratic initiative

Inclusive education for CWSNs was one of the major interventions of the erstwhile Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), RTE and RMSA schemes. Under Mr Goud's leadership, from the year 2018-19, Samagra Shiksha in Puducherry emphasized on improving quality of education for all students, including CWSNs. Thus, various student-oriented activities began to get implemented.

These included identification and assessment of CWSNs, provision of aids, appliances, corrective surgeries, Braille books, large print books and uniforms, therapeutic services, and development of teaching-learning material (TLM). There was also a focus on building the overall environment and orientation programs to create positive attitude and awareness about CWSNs' needs.

Purchase and development of instructional materials, in-service training of special educators and general teachers on curriculum adaptation, also took place. Stipends for girls with special needs (which was until then just part of the legislation and rules laid by the Center) also started being provided. Enrolment of CWSNs, and appointment of Special Educators, helped in getting many CWSNs integrated into mainstream schools.

As the numbers kept increasing, so did the challenges. The presence of a special educator made families of CWSNs believe that their child would improve in an inclusive setup. However, most special educators were experienced in handling only a particular type of special need, either visual impairment, or hearing or IDD.

An inclusive school meant a mixed group of children with varying special needs as well as age groups. The "one size fits all" concept did not give the desirable results. Special educators themselves found handling children with IDD, especially those on the autism spectrum, to be a huge challenge. Lack of sufficient experience in handling these unique children resulted in Satya taking the initiative to reach out to the government with a plan to start inclusive classrooms in mainstream schools.

Ideally what would work well is to have an induction training program prior to

Satya Special School

appointment, where all the skills needed at the classroom level are imparted. Alternatively, the government could work with teachers training institutions to ensure that regular teachers are trained for 3-6 months on special needs. The above would only be a stop gap measure. However, the solution would be to ensure that irrespective of the learning levels of the child, the teaching methodology remains activity-based, and the teaching methodologies are universal.

What inclusion looks like in Puducherry's government schools

Our discussions with Mr N. Dinakar, State Project Director, Samagra Shiksha, resulted in signing an MOU for the implementation of inclusive classrooms in mainstream schools. Five (5) schools, both urban and rural, were earmarked for the collaboration. Under this MOU, Satya would integrate CWSNs, especially those with IDD and autism, along with a special educator.

One such school was Colakara Nayakar HSS. Here, in addition to an inclusive classroom, we also had an inclusive playground. This provided the much-needed space for ensuring inclusion and integration beyond the classroom.

Initially, the response of the headmaster was unwelcoming. He did not have complete faith in the outcome of the project. He saw it merely as an image-building exercise for the Education Department. The school already had a special educator who was not keen in sharing her space with an external entity. There were incidents where some of the other teachers were harsh toward the Satya team. They felt we were wading into their space. At times, we were met with hostile comments.

All this called for some out of the box thinking. We prepared greeting cards for every single teacher in the school on Teachers Day and personally handed it over to them. This made them feel special. We offered to share the smartboard to watch the launch of Chandrayan. We also conducted some inclusive events, such as painting competitions, etc.

However, the icing of the cake was when the head of the state, the Lt. Governor of Puducherry, made a visit and congratulated the entire team. This recognition, and the unconditional acceptance shown by the neurotypically developing children, also helped us to overcome the initial roadblocks. The children managed to find themselves comfortably planted into the school atmosphere. Day by day, their interactions with their peers and the whole school has evolved into mutual acceptance in a healthy environment.

The slow but steady path for changing mindsets for inclusion

It was only the adults, i.e., parents, teachers and school management that seem to have had differences and opinions about including children with different needs. Among the neurotypically developing children, the acceptance was spontaneous, once they understood what it means to be disabled. "Their enthusiasm is infectious," says Mr Saravanan, State Coordinator Inclusion of CWSNs, Samagra Shiksha, the person responsible for the inclusive classroom program to take shape.

In the words of Selvam & Mani from the Govt. HSS Tirubuvani, where we also installed a disabled friendly playground, "Initially we made fun of them. But after the stimulation lab we attended, we understood how difficult it is for them to even do routine activities that we take for granted. Now every time I see a pothole on the road or a log hindering movement, I immediately think about the wheelchair users.

"I personally went to the village headman and explained why they need to do the repair immediately. It is scary to think how a simple pit dug on the road can prevent a fellow student from coming to school - as he cannot manoeuvre around the pit. Today wherever I go, be it a beach, temple or wedding, I look at accessibility. My friends and I plan to spread the message about inclusion and how it is important to make CWSNs access education."

The success of a project truly depends on the team. We were delighted to witness one such team in Karaikal. Here, the school's special educator, all the teachers, the headmaster, and the school management, engaged wholeheartedly with the initiative. In this, they were ably supported by the Deputy Director and other officials at the Department of Education in Karikal.

In conclusion

All the above efforts and the progressive government policies aided by the NIPUN Bharat scheme, and Vidya Pravesh programs, have resulted in the Government of Puducherry setting up Early Childcare Education Centers in all government schools. These follow the FLN – Functional Literacy and Numeracy – syllabus.

These centers try to ensure activity-based learning for all children, irrespective of their learning levels and abilities. This, we hope, will result in better acceptance of CWSNs across all age groups and ensure that social inclusion becomes a reality.

As Mr Rudhra Goud, Director of Education, shares, "Teacher psychology also needs to be considered, because patience is very important in providing services to students with disabilities. Hence teachers' training and capacity building is our primary focus."

Chitra Shah is the Director of Satya Special School, a 20-year-old organization working in the space of empowerment of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (PwIDDs), with a focus on strengthening the ecosystems surrounding them.

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Connect on:

Deconstructing the system

Geetika Arora and Prerna Kalra

Let's begin by taking a pause. Imagine you are inside a school. You see children playing hopscotch in an open space, their laughter echoing inside the walls of the schools. Some children sitting in the corner are helping each other make a "4" with their fingers, and a few others are listening intently to the colorful stories of wedding celebrations in the village, enjoying their day in the bright shining sunlight. This imagery leaves you with a smile, does it not? For this safety, openness and care to become a reality in all the schools in India, we need teachers equipped and supported to lead this change.

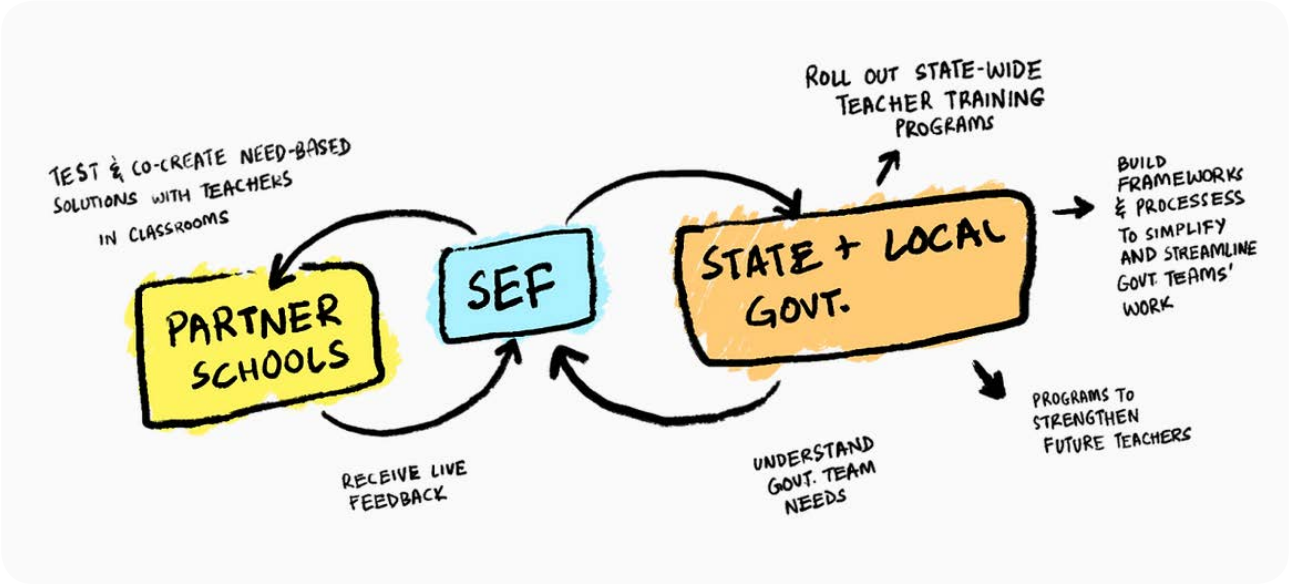
At SEF, our vision is to ensure that children across government schools thrive. And we believe that a key enabler in this journey is the teacher. A teacher who is highly skilled, loving and intuitive can transform a student's learning experience. We are working with government institutions like the State Council of Educational Research & Training (SCERT) and the District Institute of Education and Training (DIET) across three (3) states (Punjab, Delhi and Uttarakhand) to build capacity within their teams and their more than two (2) lakh current teachers.

To move toward this ambitious vision, we consider it important to ground ourselves in the realities of our teacher support system. We do this by understanding context and taking learnings from our eight (8) partner schools. We test solutions in these schools before we launch them at scale.

Challenges of scale

However, as we scale, the challenges we face change, requiring constant adaptation and brainstorming. When we first entered the system, we faced resistance from the stakeholders. Questions on our experience and understanding like, "How many days have you spent on the ground?," "We are already doing our best, don't share more resources, we will not use them," were common.

One hour into our first-ever training with teacher educators, the core facilitator stopped us and said, "This won't be useful for teachers. Why should we take this ahead? You have not been on the ground much. So how do you know what training will be valuable to teachers? We will not take this training ahead."



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It felt disheartening and challenging to not get a chance to share what we were offering. However, this also pushed us to think differently.

Learning from challenges and adapting our approach

We needed to modify our approach to work meaningfully with the government. We needed champions in the system who would be the torchbearers of our work. We faced some key challenges. These pushed us to shift our approach to build investments and strengthen collaborations with the system.

Focusing on stakeholders' well-being and voice: The first challenge was that our stakeholders were not feeling involved. Hence, we shifted our approach by keeping the stakeholders' voice and well-being at the center. We have built strong collaborations within the system by conducting co-working spaces for the system's stakeholders. The goal has been to ensure that they are part of the process from the start to the end of the intervention design and execution cycle.

> "We all felt valued and heard, as we could see our suggestions were being incorporated during the workshop. Sometimes, when we facilitate, our whole focus is on delivering the content. But these two days, we felt that our well-being was at the center. It made me realize how important it is to establish this 'Learner at the center.' Gratitude." - Monica Sharma, Mentor Teacher, Delhi

In all our co-working spaces, we add elements of well-being, e.g., starting with a check-in question, checking on with stakeholders individually before to understand their mind space, being flexible with their requirements, etc. These practices have helped us build authentic relationships. In these spaces our stakeholders feel they can share openly. This increases their investment and involvement.

We also leverage the co-working spaces to hear their on-ground experiences. We are, thus, able to understand the context in detail, brainstorm with them, and get reviews. This helps us to modify our interventions to make them more relevant and contextual. It has also helped in building accountability and magnifying the quality of our work.

Building alignment on shared goals: When we started, our stakeholders did not find our interventions to be relevant. To navigate this challenge, we focused on building alignment on shared goals.

Working with the system has its own complexities. Many a times, the system's priorities shift and hence creating alignment takes more time. We particularly remember an instance where SEF, in collaboration with SCERT, Delhi, had launched a teacher competency framework as a guiding document. The overall goal was to build key competencies of teachers of Delhi's government schools.

As the leadership changed, the focus also shifted from competency-based training to general training, e.g., road safety, etc. Revisiting the shared goals in the form of a teacher competency framework with the stakeholders helped in realigning our priorities. It also brought the focus back on competency-based training, which would have otherwise been deprioritized.

Co-creating trust: Trust is a foundational requirement to build any partnership or to collaborate. Initially, there was a massive lack of trust in us. With this realization, we consciously chose to prioritize communication.

T\o build the credibility of our work, we constantly communicate authentically about the progress we have made. We also

share the challenges we have faced with the stakeholders. This helps to close the loop of communication. It also fastens the decision-making process.

We share fortnightly progress emails and intervention-wise reports. We also conduct progress and brainstorming meetings with bureaucrats and other governmental stakeholders. Most importantly, all our intervention WhatsApp groups have relevant stakeholders who can constantly see the progress.

They add their inputs and support us whenever we are stuck. This has made them feel a part of the process. They also understand that any good collaboration is a two-way street and needs efforts from both sides.

These three shifts in our approach, and deeper understanding of our stakeholders, have helped us experience changes in the way our stakeholders show up. There is trust in the system, for who we are, and the work we do.

We now hear things like, "Let's do this together," "This is a great idea and would be a helpful resource", "I need support in conducting an activity-based lesson," etc. This spirit and motivation to collaborate is our source of energy on all days, knowing that what we do creates a meaningful impact.

Key learnings from our journey of deconstructing systems

We have some key learnings that have stayed with us. These have emerged from our engagements with the system and stakeholders. These learnings inform our work in all systems programs.

Context matters: In our experience of working in different spaces and settings, the context has mattered in making the interventions relevant and meaningful for stakeholders. But what does it really mean to understand the context? The context includes the physical setting and the environment. It also involves the way people engage and interact with one another. The stories that bring the culture to life, the beliefs, value systems, motivations, and assumptions held, everything is a part of understanding context.

> "Team SEF was awesome. Each one of you was aware of your roles and delivered the content timely and effectively. It was a wonderful experience." - Sunita Chauhan, Mentor Teacher, on her experience of a collaborative design workshop

Authentic relationships: Certainly, we have all built and experienced relationships in our lives. And often, it is easy to know which ones are genuine, and which ones transactional. Similarly, stakeholders, irrespective of where you work, can see through relationships that are transactional and have a certain intent in mind, for the sake of getting things done.

Building strong, genuine relationships, and understanding others' perspectives and needs, require ongoing effort and empathy. However, it helps sustain investment and build trust for the work we do.

Identify your champions: In our work, we have seen that working with individuals who have clarity of their role and influence in the system is important. This ensures that interventions have a stronger buy-in, and are executed with pace and quality.

A healthy practice is to be observant, and consistently take stock of multiple points of leverage. If things change within the system, this helps in maintaining some level of stability and trust.

We have consciously formed core teams in the work that we do with the in-service and pre-service programs. The goal has been to enable multiple people from the system to be involved in every step of the process, from design to execution. This ensures that

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irrespective of changes, a few individuals will continue to be strong anchors, supporting the work and other team members who join in.

Challenges we are yet to unlock

We have had strong learnings and experiences while working with stakeholders. However, we continue to experience a few challenges. We are continuously working on learning from these and work on improvement. We discuss a few of the challenges we are trying to address below.

Multiple decision-makers and delays in decision-making: Decision-making is an important part of any individual's, especially a leader's, role. It is imperative that decisions are made that are informed, agile and adaptive, ensuring a positive impact. Yet, this process often becomes complex in any system, which involves multiple stakeholders at different levels, taking the decisions and being impacted by them.

In our work, we have often experienced delays due to changes in the leadership, conversations going in loops without clear direction, and inconsistencies in the execution of decisions due to fear of failure.

In such cases, it is essential to be clear of who needs to be involved, who is taking the decisions, and how to ensure execution of the said decisions. This can help ensure that we are being deliberate and effective in this process.

Stakeholders' buy-in: As shared previously, there are different people involved in different roles and decisions, hence, gaining a buy-in is a complex and time-consuming process. Each stakeholder brings in a unique perspective and priorities. These need to be factored in to design any intervention. Engaging in dialogue, and building a shared vision, through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and one-on-one meetings, has often helped us address misconceptions and build alignment. However, dissonances prevail, given the number of stakeholders we work with.

Constantly changing priorities: Priorities of government institutes often evolve according to the changing political and social environment. Hence, there is a constant need to be agile and adaptive. It needs us to constantly rethink our priorities and align with the stakeholders. This process also requires us to build some stability in the highs and lows experienced, while taking cognizance of our emotional states as well as that of our stakeholders.

These learnings and challenges have enabled us to show up with empathy. We strive to build a collaborative environment, where we value the wholeness of each human, their reality and context, without wavering from our pursuit of excellence.

As an organization, when we started this journey, we did have moments of creeping fear of not knowing or being enough, of being unsure of the next step and not feeling hopeful of achieving our vision. However, over the past few years, we have learnt to embrace the reality of this being a marathon and not a sprint. We realize that our journey will require consistency and grit.

We have co-worked with some wonderful humans across leadership levels. They have supported us. They have been our light on difficult days. They have often helped us brainstorm to ensure that initiatives materialize with quality. These individuals have been instrumental in solidifying our work. We have now reached a space in a few

of our programs where trust is present and collaboration is organic. In these initiatives our stakeholders in the system push us as much as we push them, to produce a solid quality of work each day.

> "Co-working with our system educators has helped us understand the context in a deep and meaningful way. Personally, conversations with stakeholders have been mini-learning lessons. One such conversation was with a mentor teacher who said, "Oftentimes teachers are overwhelmed and when they enter classrooms, the overwhelm of too much work translates in the classroom atmosphere. As a mentor, I ask my primary teachers to take five deep breaths before entering a class." These experiences, challenges, and best practices bring relevance to our training design, allowing teachers to feel a stronger connection with the content when they attend sessions."
> - Shinjinee Pal, Manager, Udaan-Delhi Systems Project

In this journey, we have learnt that it is imperative to work with different stakeholders and systems. No one of us can achieve this vision in isolation. It is our collective responsibility to show up with grit, purpose, and excellence for our children every day, bringing this vision to life.

Geetika Arora has extensively worked in Teacher Professional Development programs for more than six years, in both private and government sectors. Prior to this, she has taught on the ground for more than four years. She currently leads the Delhi Systems In-service Teacher Professional Development Project in Simple Education Foundation. In this initiative she works with SCERT Delhi to ensure that high quality, competency-based training is reaching all 70,000+ teachers. She is reachable at geetika.arora2005@gmail.com and geetika.arora@simpleeducationfoundation.org.

Prerna Kalra has been working in the field of education for almost a decade now, having worked in both urban and rural contexts in India, in collaboration with the government system. She currently leads the Delhi Systems Pre-Service Project at Simple Education Foundation. Here she works with 34 institutes (government and affiliated) offering Diploma in Elementary Education to 4,000+ future teachers. Prerna holds a Masters in Education from Harvard Graduate School of Education, is a Teach For India Alumnus, and was a part of the 2021 cohort of the WISE Emerging Leader Fellowship Program. She is reachable at prerna.kalra@simpleeducationfoundation.org

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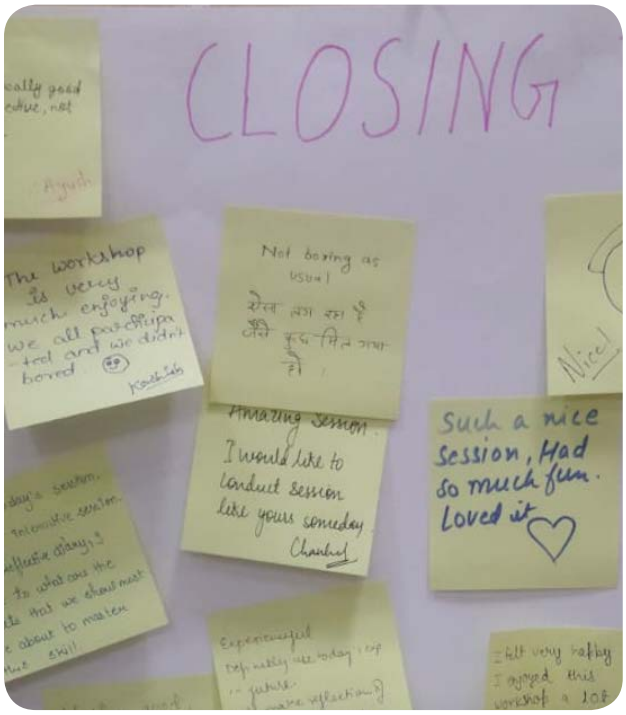

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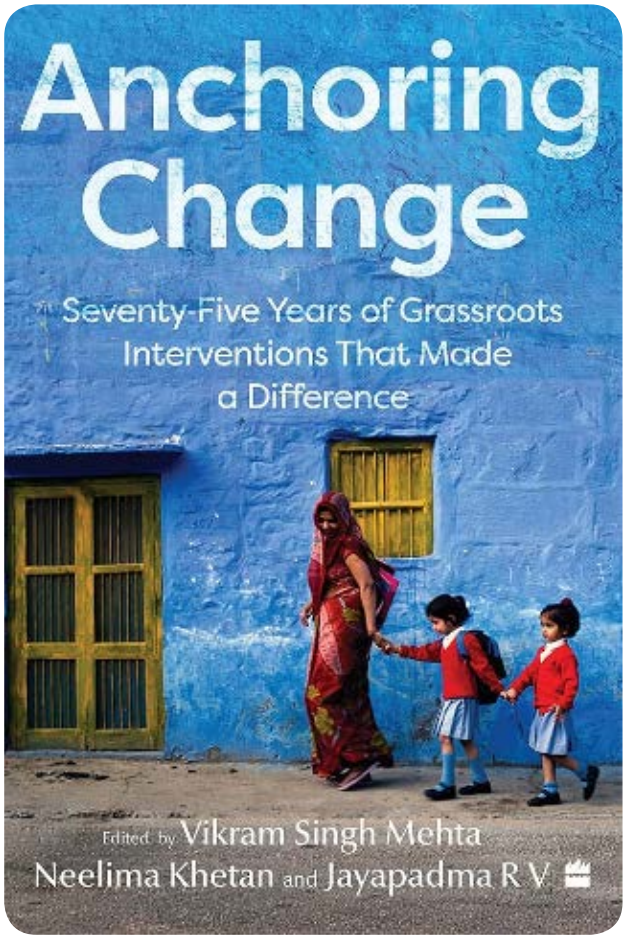
A few words to guide us

Aswin Jayakumar

Mehta, V.S., Khetan, N. and Jayapadma, R.V. (Editors). 2022. *Anchoring change: Seventy-five years of grassroots intervention that made a difference.* Harper Collins.



Independent India fueled by a comprehensive and robust constitution, empowered its citizens, through the establishment of a vibrant and resilient democracy. Over the span of more than seventy-five years, Indian society has witnessed powerful social interventions at the grassroots level, spearheaded by civil society organizations, government bodies, exceptional individuals, and other entities.

Anchoring change is an anthology of experiences that documents some of these successful interventions from across the country's post-independence history. The narratives in the book have been carefully curated by the editors from formally organized, geographically diverse, and temporally spread, lesser-known yet effective, initiatives that have left a significant mark on their respective domains and social contexts.

Anchoring change begins with a chapter curated by Vikram Singh Mehta, aptly titled "Synthesis." Mehta's essay summarizes the subsequent chapters guiding us through the intricate relationship between state, society and market in post-independence India.

Mehta emphasizes a common thread that ties these stories together: the absence of a one-size-fits-all solution to India's challenges. Instead, each chapter tells a unique tale of how specific interventions emerged locally in response to pressing issues.

One key insight highlighted by Mehta is the pivotal role of civil society organizations that have been deeply embedded in the communities they serve. By virtue of their position within the communities, Mehta notes that such organizations have had the capacity to formulate effective strategies for sustained change. Additionally, Mehta underscores the importance of five components that have been essential to the success of such interventions.

Conviction and belief: The stories within this book emphasize that those directly affected should be the driving force behind change, with civil society organizations acting as facilitators. This demands superlative conviction and unwavering belief in the potential of human beings, however powerless they may seem to be.

Design: Sustainable change hinges on interventions designed around the beneficiaries, with their active participation.

Process: The process defines how inputs lead to outputs. Each chapter highlights the meticulous construction of this process, so that the link between input and output remains intact throughout.

Leadership: Most accounts underscore the significance of stable, persistent and continuous leadership for the success of interventions. Leadership from outside the organization, such as political figures and bureaucrats, also plays a significant role.

Ecosystem: Excerpts from the book highlight the positive impact of strong partnerships between civil society organizations and the government. Numerous accounts demonstrate that working with the bureaucracy and political dignitaries enhances the effectiveness of grassroots interventions.

Most stories in this book are penned by the same hands who were intimately involved in these remarkable experiences. Aloysius Prakash Fernandez, a pioneer in microfinance and the Self-Help Group (SHG) movement in India, narrates the story of MYRADA, an organization strongly associated with the emergence of the SHG model. Fernandez emphasizes how MYRADA's hyperlocal work gained institutional support, thanks to the policy frameworks of Reserve Bank of India and National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD).

Similarly, Laila Tyabji discusses Dastkar, a unique initiative supporting artisans and craftspeople in receiving fair compensation for their skills and knowledge. Tyabji also shares her own inspirational journey of transformation and self-discovery through Dastkar, alongside the crafts and the people involved. Both these examples stand out as shining examples of the five values/ components discussed above.

The stories from *Anchoring change* impart lessons on courage, consistency and risk-taking. They serve as a reminder that monumental change takes time. For instance, the ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) worker program, under National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), drew inspiration from the Jamkhed health model described in one of the chapters. However, it took 30 years to formalize this crucial village health worker role.

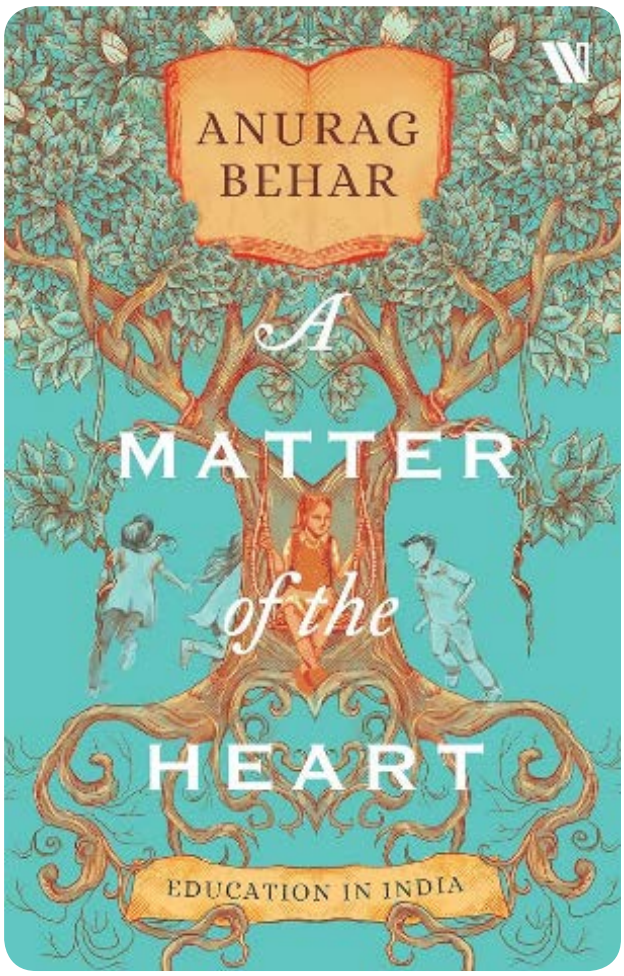
Elsewhere, Srikanth Viswanathan of Janaagraha discusses the importance of "urgent patience." He sees this as "a modern form of karma yoga, of doing what we have to, irrespective of the outcomes."

The stories in *Anchoring Change* are meant to inspire hope and fortitude. These urge us to stay vigilant, progress, and draw inspiration from accounts that have truly made a difference.

Behar, Anurag. 2023. *A matter of the heart: Education in India*. Westland Books.

Working with the public education system is often seen as a frustrating and arduous endeavor, rarely appearing to produce long-term impact. In his insightful collection of stories drawn from his experiences with Azim Premji Foundation, Anurag Behar encourages us to look at the brighter side and explore avenues for enhancing the system. He takes us on a journey through the heart of India's public education system, vividly portraying the most remote and underserved schools in India's villages. Through the characters he has encountered, and the narratives they have shared, Behar meticulously weaves together tales of wisdom and offers recommendations for education policy.

A matter of the heart comprises a series of articles penned by Anurag Behar for the newspaper *Mint.* The book's chapters shed light on the myriad challenges afflicting India's public education system as seen from many perspectives - students, teachers,



school leaders, education officers, and more. Behar follows these insights with well-crafted policy prescriptions and guidance for educational practitioners.

Throughout the book, Behar vehemently makes a case for the vital role that public schools should play in India's education landscape. He asserts, with reference to research and international examples, that more private schools will do little to swing the needle. He firmly states, "private schools cannot deliver true public education."

I must not overlook paying tribute to the artist behind the book's cover, credited as Bhavya on the back cover. As Behar reveals in an interview, the book cover visually represents one of the chapters, "Under the banyan tree," which happens to be one of my favorites. This chapter echoes a theme that Behar consistently emphasizes throughout the book: "the purpose of education is to create a just, equitable, and human society, and a vibrant democracy."

Another recurring theme in the book is that "the foundation of good education is a good teacher." A quick glance at the book's table of contents makes it clear that this topic is indeed a matter close to the author's heart. In almost every chapter, Behar advocates for enhancing teacher education, teacher training, and their working conditions within schools. He shares inspirational stories of teachers who have achieved remarkable feats, from diverting floods to planting trees.

Throughout the book, Behar immerses the reader in the location with painstaking detail. For instance, in the chapter "Education in the land of extremes," Behar compares the intricate artwork on the ceiling of a room at a Block Resource Centre in Lohaghat to the grandeur of the Sistine Chapel. The illustrations depicted Einstein's space-time continuum, highlighting the distortions caused by gravity. Behar observes, "What a wonder it was, Einstein's time-space continuum on a ceiling in Lohaghat, co-existing with the unsurprising stink from toilets!" Behar's ability to find beauty amidst the chaos is truly admirable. Each chapter serves as a tribute to discovering the extraordinary buried within the sands of mediocrity, perhaps the book's core message.

Dealing with the public education system is undoubtedly a challenge, and it is easy to lose one's focus amidst the negativity. However, Behar's message is one of persistence, being *ziddi* (stubborn), and the importance of focusing on the positives and on what can be accomplished in the present.

Kumar, M. and Sarangapani, P.M. (Editors). 2005. *Improving government schools: What has been tried and what works*. Books for Change.

Improving government schools is a thoughtfully curated collection of essays that delve into various initiatives within

government schools across the country. As I read through its pages, I found it reminiscent of the two books I have just discussed: *Anchoring change* and *A matter of the heart.* Much like *Anchoring Change, Improving government schools* also explores geographically and temporally diverse interventions within India's government school system.

In alignment with Anurag Behar's book, *Improving government schools* draws upon anecdotes and narratives from the field to vividly immerse the readers in the schools and soak in the intricate details of these interventions. Through their essays, the editors and the authors reaffirm the preeminence of government schools and offer valuable insights and recommendations for enhancing the public education system.

In the introductory piece, Kumar and Sarangapani point out that the relationship between non-governmental organizations (NGO) and the government has often been *precarious*. Historically, NGOs have faced difficulties while working with the governmental education system. The various interventions presented in this book showcase innovative approaches to overcome the barriers set by the system.

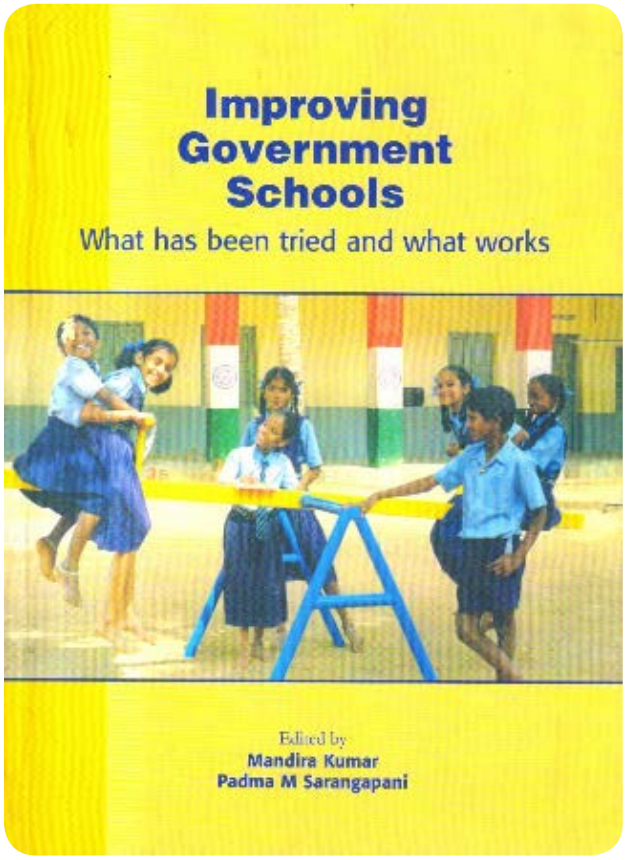
For instance, in the chapter titled "Social entrepreneurship the corporate way," Archana Mehendale discusses how memoranda of understanding (MOU) have been employed to formalize NGO-government projects. While MOUs between civil society organizations and government agencies have become more common, the level of seriousness and respect accorded to them varies.

The accounts in the book also highlight how organizations have leveraged government policies and programs as gateways to engage with the public education system. As Archana Mehendale notes in the chapter titled "Towards inclusive education," Bengaluru-based-NGO, Seva-in-Action (SIA) partnered with the District Primary Education Program (DPEP) to provide training for teachers in government schools.

Eventually, their efforts gained recognition from Janshala, a joint initiative of the United Nations and Government of India, which led to the expansion of SIA's work across various blocks in the state of Karnataka.

Several accounts underscore the close collaboration between NGOs and the local governments, a partnership that was substantially strengthened by the decentralization policy of 1993-94, which granted them constitutional status through the 73rd and 74th Amendments.

Furthermore, localized innovations have often evolved into government initiatives at a larger scale. In the chapter "Multigrade schools of Rishi Valley," Anjali Noronha describes how the *Nali-Kali* program originated following an education officer's visit to a Rishi Valley Rural Education Centre, established by the



Krishnamurti Foundation of India (KFI). However, not every story has a fairytale ending. Ira Saraswat in "Windows between schools and society" explains how Eklavya's program, despite its remarkable success, was abruptly terminated by the government.

Vinalini Mathrani narrates in "I can read and write," how pushback from a teachers' union marked the end of Pratham's *Balsakhi* program, which placed assistant teachers in schools. This reflects the reality in which many such interventions exist, thrive, and continue to hope for the best.

I cannot conclude this review better than quoting from the foreword of the book penned by Krishna Kumar, who eloquently articulates why these accounts hold immeasurable value for anyone seeking to reform our public education system: "All the stories we read here are like still photography, of moments when cyclonic weather hit a region, or an institution steeped in routine. Cyclonic weather is normally pleasant, but it does not last. Even innovations stagnate when they drag on. That is why we need to recall them, to deepen our understanding, and to strengthen our resolve."

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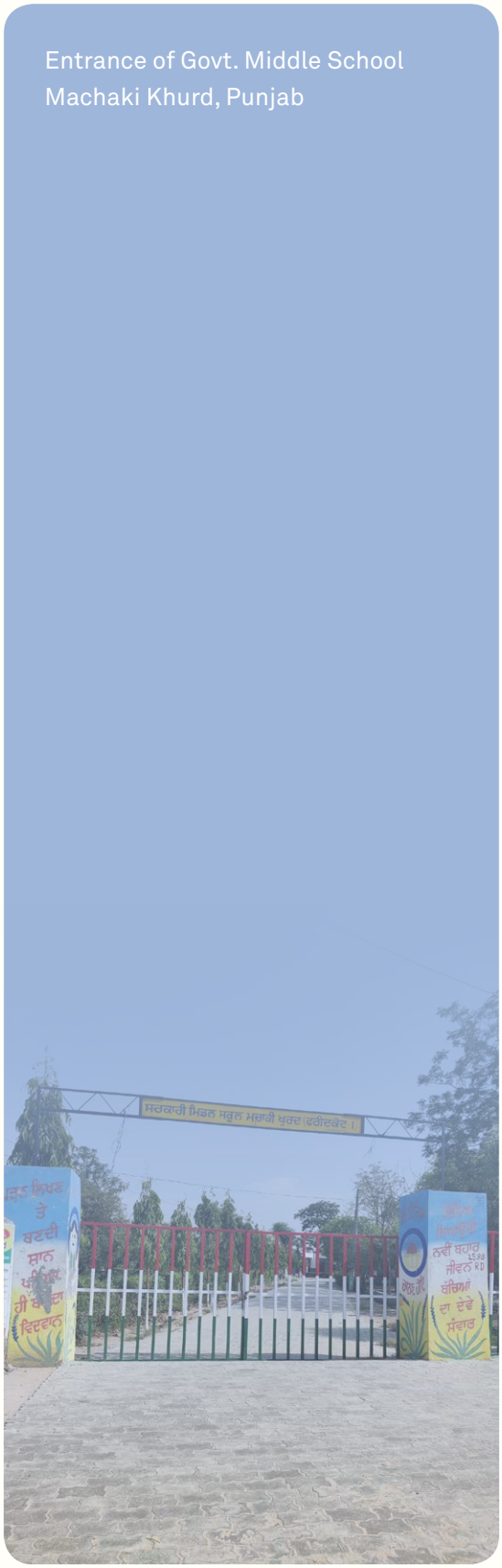
Government Primary School,Kharwada Amona Bicholim, Goa

Entrance of Govt. Middle School
Machaki Khurd, Punjab



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School students taking mid day meal at
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