Samuhik Pahal

सामूहिक पहल

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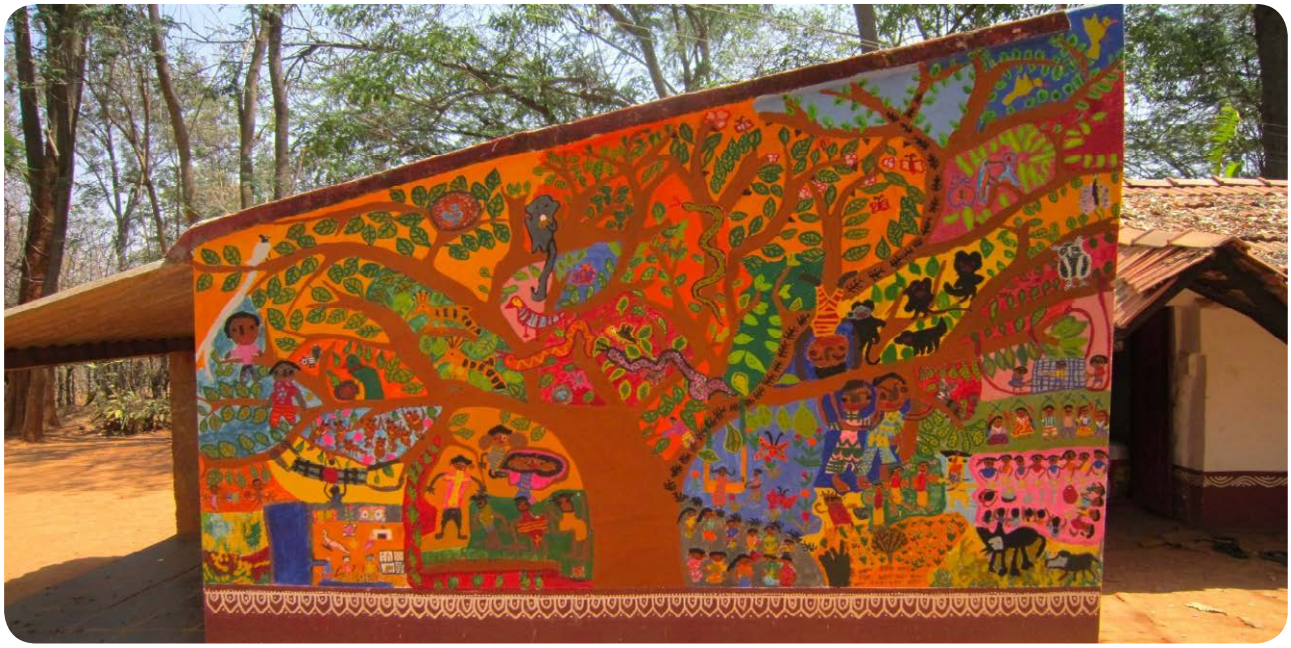
Failure in the social sector

CONTENTS

What is it that we do, when we fail?



Sita School

No one seems to like failure these days. But what does failure even mean? Is it merely an antonym of success? Then what does success mean? If one does not succeed, does one fail?

But of course we are not asking these questions in a generic, linguistic sense here. The output of our work as CSOs is often narrated in the form of success stories now. These are stories of radical transformation, of 'before' and 'after,' where the inputs provided by nonprofits change lives in positive ways, thus translating into 'impact.'

Real life though, the lives of team members who work in the field, that of community members, and of other stakeholders from the system who we work with, are messy and unpredictable. These are beyond perhaps the easy calculations of our input-output metrics.

So, how do we make sense of our work? How do we figure out whether our efforts are making a difference? How do we gather ourselves together, when we have failed in the eyes of others in our work? How do we manage emotions within the team, when a funder does not renew a project, despite we doing our best, because they feel it will not scale or because the work is too resource intensive?

Perhaps getting back to the basics will help. The first point to remember is why we are here in the first place - because we believe that a different world is possible - a world in which everyone has a chance to change their lives for the better, where each one is treated equitably, where public systems do not discriminate between people based on caste, class and religion, and even the poorest of the poor can lead lives of dignity and respect.

This is a worthy goal. No matter which part of the garden we are trying to cultivate, it is still a tiny patch. But it is an important patch. Without our weeding, planting and watering, it will remain barren, at least much less lush. And much of this work is long-term, even generational in nature. Therefore, not to succeed, does not necessarily mean that we have failed.

Social reality is complex. Despite our best efforts, we might not always be able to

control and optimize all the factors in an intervention. When we 'fail,' it is perhaps best to do a little thought experiment.

It might be quite salutary to imagine the various possible scenarios in the given field, if we would not have intervened. This will alert us to areas that could be probable blind spots. It may also help us plan our interventions better.

While talking about failure and success, we also need to be aware of unintended outcomes. Even when we do not produce the impact we had envisaged, every social intervention does produce some outcomes. Being mindful of this is critical.

Sometimes, the long-term consequences of so-called 'success' may be debilitating, both in an organizational and in a societal sense. And what we see as 'failure' may actually turn out to be a space of learning, re-grouping and reflecting, and thus of regeneration.

The fact remains that some, if not most, social sector interventions will fail. As a community, we have perhaps become overly focused on claiming success, as we chase after indicators for impact. The desire for impact directly ties in with the mushrooming of 'success stories,' and arguably with the crisis of well-being in the sector.

Despite the complexities and ambiguities in the field, if we want to create equitable outcomes at a societal and systemic scale, we must truthfully accept our realities. This is not possible, if we do not accept failures as a natural part of any process of experimentation and making efforts.

If we were to reflect honestly, we might realize that a large part of what we take to be impact, are actually outcomes. Some of these are perhaps not even ultimately desirable.Seeing failure as integral to life, and being modest about what we are trying to do in the sector, may perhaps help us in becoming personally reflective and reflexive as social actors. It may also help us become process-oriented and well-being centered as organizations.

Sita School

असफलता

जो चोपड़ा मैकगोवन

असफलता क्या होती है इससे हम सभी परिचित हैं। यह ज़िन्दगी की एक ऐसी सच्चाई है, जिससे कोई बच नहीं सकता। हर कोई असफल होता है। कुछ लोग सार्वजनिक तौर पर, असाधारण रूप से बार-बार असफल होते हैं। दूसरी तरफ़ कुछ लोग ऐसे भी होते हैं, जो अपनी असफलताओं पर पर्दा डाल पाते हैं। वे जीवन में ऐसी सहजता से आगे बढ़ते हुए प्रतीत होते हैं, मानो उनके छूने पर मिट्टी भी सोना हो जा रही हो। हममें से अधिकांश लोग अपने जीवन में सार्वजनिक और छिपी हुई, दोनों तरह की असफलताओं का अनुभव करते हैं।

ऐसे साहसी लोगों के लिए, जो न केवल ख़ुद की, बल्कि दुनिया की समस्याओं को भी सुलझाने का बीड़ा उठाने को तैयार होते हैं, असफलता एक कुत्ते के पट्टे की तरह होती है, जो उन्हें उनकी हद में रहने को मजबूर कर देती है। हम दुनिया की भूख की समस्या, जलवायु परिवर्तन और महिलाओं पर होनेवाली हिंसा जैसी समस्याओं को सुलझाने की दिशा में धीमी गति से प्रगति कर ही रहे होते हैं कि अचानक हमें एक अप्रत्याशित चुनौती का सामना करना पड़ता है। हमारा अनुदान का प्रस्ताव अस्वीकृत हो जाता है। हमारा निगरानी और मूल्यांकन निदेशक किसी प्रतिद्वंद्वी संस्था के साथ काम करने के लिए इस्तीफ़ा दे देता है। हमारा एफसीआरए रद्द हो जाता है।

जी हाँ, हमारा एफसीआरए रद्द हो गया था। ऐसा किस वजह से हुआ यह हम जानते हैं और आप भी अंदाज़ा लगा सकते हैं, लेकिन यहाँ मैं यह बताने के लिए नहीं हूँ। इसके बजाए आज मैं असफलता और हम इसका सामना कैसे करते हैं, इस पर बात करना चाहती हूँ। भारत के किसी भी गैर सरकारी संगठन के लिए विदेशी फंड हासिल करने का अधिकार खो देने से बड़ी असफलता भी कोई हो सकती है?

हाल ही में, आइडीआर ("India Development Review") को दिए गए एक साक्षात्कार में अमित चन्द्रा ने बताया कि आज वे जो कुछ भी हैं अपनी असफलताओं की बदौलत हैं। इसी तरह, हमारे एफसीआरए लाइसेंस को बनाए रखने में हमें मिली असफलता (या यूँ कहे की जो उस समय असफलता लग रही थी) भी हमारे लिए परिवर्तनकारी थी।

एक विदेशी होने के नाते, यह अनुभव इतना ज़्यादा व्यक्तिगत और विक्षुब्ध कर देने वाला लग रहा था कि एक पल को मैं थम सी गई। मैंने पिछले 30 सालों में जो कुछ भी किया था, मैं उस पर सवाल उठाने लगी, यहाँ तक कि अपने पड़ोसियों को भी शक की निगाह से देखने लगी और सोचने लगी कि क्या वे मुझे स्वीकार करते हैं या फिर अब अपना सामान पैक करके अपने "घर" लौटने का समय आ गया है।

इस स्थिति का सामना करने के लिए मैंने एक सकारात्मक नज़रिया विकसित करने की बहुत कोशिश की। विकसित करने की कोशिश की, यह कहना ही सही होगा क्योंकि यह मुझमें स्वाभाविक रूप से मौजूद नहीं है। यह समझना और स्वीकार करना कि अच्छी और बुरी दोनों तरह की घटनाएँ होती रहेंगी और हमारे नियंत्रण में केवल इतना ही होता है कि हम उन पर कैसे प्रतिक्रिया करें, यह सोच काफ़ी हद तक (बौद्ध धर्म की) ज़ेन विचारधारा से मिलती-जुलती है।

मैंने नज़रिया विकसित करने की कोशिश ज़रूर की, लेकिन असल में यह सब होने की वजह से मैं कई महीनों तक असुरक्षित, शर्मिन्दा, दूसरों द्वारा आलोचना या मूल्यांकन का डर और आहत महसूस करती रही। मुझे अपने सहकर्मियों और जिन परिवारों के बच्चों के लिए हम काम करते हैं, उनकी अपेक्षाओं पर खरा न उतर पाने पर अपराधबोध हुआ।

ऐसा कुछ होने वाला है, इसका पहले से अंदाजा न लगा पाने की वजह से मुझे लगने लगा कि मैं कितनी मूर्ख हूँ। इसके साथ ही आने वाले कल पर इसके असर को सोचकर मैं भयभीत भी हुई। मेरा स्वाभिमान लगभग ख़त्म हो गया, मानो मेरी एकमात्र पहचान मेरा काम था। मुझे लगने लगा कि अगर मैं काम में ही असफल हो गई तो फिर और बचा ही क्या?

जब हम अपने जीवन के किसी एक क्षेत्र में असफल होते हैं तो इसका हम पर बहुत गहरा असर पड़ता है। मुझे लगता है कि असफलता के इस पहलू पर, जिस पर हम शायद ही कभी ध्यान देते हैं, ध्यान देना काफ़ी उपयोगी हो सकता है। असफल होने पर हम न केवल अपने हरेक काम पर सन्देह जताने लगते हैं, बल्कि इससे हमारे मन में हमारे अस्तित्व से जुड़े प्रश्न भी पैदा होने लगते हैं जैसे कि – हम कौन हैं, इस दुनिया में हमारे होने के क्या मायने हैं आदि। ऐसी स्थिति उन लोगों के लिए ख़ासकर समस्याजनक हो सकती है, जो अपना जीवन किसी उद्देश्य के लिए समर्पित कर देते हैं। हममें से अधिकांश लोगों के लिए हमारा काम हमारा जुनून होता है। इसी से हमारी पहचान बनती है। वास्तव में, एक व्यक्ति के तौर पर हमारी धारणाओं और मूल्यों व हमारे काम के बीच में गहरा जुड़ाव होता है।

इस मामले में मैं ख़ुद को भाग्यशाली मानती हूँ कि मेरे परिवार ने और मेरे दोस्तों ने कभी भी मुझे पूरी तरह से मेरी व्यावसायिक उपलब्धियों से जोड़कर नहीं देखा। उन्होंने मेरे काम की सराहना ज़रूर की, लेकिन उन्होंने मेरे व्यक्तित्व और चरित्र व मैं जो हूँ, जैसी हूँ, उसके लिए मुझे अपनाया। यह सब होने के बाद भी उनके और मेरे आपसी सम्बन्धों में कोई बदलाव नहीं आया। उनके अनुसार जो कुछ भी हुआ उसके पीछे की वजह राजनीति और फ़ायदे थे और उसका मुझसे कोई लेना-देना नहीं था।

मेरे परिवार और मेरे मित्रों ने मुझ पर, मेरी उपयोगिता और मेरी ईमानदारी पर किसी भी तरह का सन्देह जताए बिना, मेरे प्रति अपना प्यार, परवाह, समर्थन और मेरे साथ हुई नाइंसाफ़ी के

प्रति आक्रोश खुलकर, बार-बार और सबके सामने जताया। उन्होंने बिना किसी लाग-लपेट के और बिना मुझे मूर्ख घोषित किए मुझसे संवाद किया। मेरी पोती ने मुझसे पूछा, "दादी आपको कैसा महसूस हो रहा है?" और जब भी मैंने अपने पोते से व्हाट्सएप पर बात की तो उसने मुझसे पूछा, "दादी आप आ रही हो क्या?" किसी ने भी, यहाँ तक कि बच्चों ने भी, कभी भी मुझे पीछे हटने या काम बन्द करने की सलाह नहीं दी। उनके इस सहयोग की बदौलत धीरे-धीरे मैं पहले जैसी हो गई। मैं बेहतर महसूस करने लगी। मैं स्थिति की स्पष्ट समझ हासिल कर पाई। और शायद जीवन में पहली बार इस कैथोलिक महिला को यह समझ आया कि जब भगवान कृष्ण ने अर्जुन से कहा कि, "तुमको केवल अपने निर्धारित कर्तव्य का पालन करने का अधिकार है, तुम अपने कार्यों के फल के हकदार नहीं हो" तो इससे उनका क्या तात्पर्य था। और इससे भी बढ़कर वे कहते हैं, "अपने कार्यों के नतीजों का ज़िम्मेदार कभी भी ख़ुद को मत ठहराओ।"

अपने दोस्तों और रिश्तेदारों से मिले निःस्वार्थ प्रेम और कृष्ण द्वारा प्रदान किए गए ज्ञान से मुझे जो स्पष्टता मिली, उससे एक नया विचार उभरा: *किसे पता कि यह घटना या जीवन में होनेवाली कोई और घटना अच्छी है या बुरी?* इस तरह एक अलग नज़रिए से देखने पर, एफ़सीआरए की अनुमति न मिलने की घटना कम भयभीत करनेवाली, कम प्रबल प्रतीत हुई। और वास्तव में, जब मैं इसे असलफता न मानकर सिर्फ एक तथ्य मानने लगी, तो मैं इसके बारे में और ज्यादा स्पष्टता से सोच पाई। मुझे एहसास हुआ कि सफलताएँ और असफलताएँ दोनों मुख्य तौर पर तथ्य हैं, इनके पीछे कई घटनाएँ जिम्मेदार होती हैं, उन घटनाओं में हमारा किरदार बहुत छोटा होता है। यह समझना हमारे लिए बहुत मददगार होता है।

अब इस घटना को एक साल हो चुके हैं। यह सच है कि हमारे द्वारा बड़ी ही कठिनाई से इकट्ठा किए गए फंड्स का कुछ हिस्सा अभी भी हमारे प्रतिबन्धित एफसीआरए खाते में मौजूद है, लेकिन हमने अपने भारतीय मूल के नए-नए विविध पृष्ठभूमियों वाले डोनर्स से पिछले साल की तुलना में तीन गुना ज़्यादा फंड्स इकट्ठा किए। भले ही हमें फंड्स के वैसे संकट का सामना नहीं करना पड़ा, जैसा हमें भय था, लेकिन फिर भी हमें हमेशा सतर्क रहना चाहिए। सच्चाई और ईमानदारी वाले काम के लिए डोनर्स भी मिल ही जाते हैं। हमारा काम अभी बाकी है। बस काम करते रहिए।

जो चोपड़ा मैकगोवन 'लतिका रॉय फाउंडेशन' की संस्थापक और कार्यकारी निदेशक हैं। **जो** ने 28 से अधिक वर्षों तक विकलांगता से जुड़ी सेवाओं, अधिकारों और जागरूकता पर काम किया है। वह बदलाव की प्रक्रिया में आम लोगों की शक्ति/योगदान में विश्वास करती है, और वह अपने काम में फोटोग्राफी, प्यार और जुनून पिरोती है।

Website: latikaroy.org

Email: jo@latikaroy.org

Connect on:

commons.wikimedia.org/ Fredericknoronha

School children at a school in Goa

On your mark, get set, fail!

Pallavi Maheshwari, Priyanka Rambol and Soumya Bhaskaracharya

Failure.

This was the first time we tried to search for how the Oxford Dictionary defined failure. The dictionary defines failure as - "to not be successful in achieving something."

Searching for the antonym of failure resulted into an aha! moment while working on this article!

It is - "curious!"

I am sure, you, the reader, just like us, are flooded with many memories and examples of individuals (maybe more observed in toddlers) who have demonstrated curiosity. We were thinking these words. "Ah! So that's what the absence of fear looks like!"

We did a little more asking around with our team before penning down this article. "Tell us what thoughts, sensations, emotions and feelings you have, whenever you have experienced failure."

These are the sensations that were named: shivers; a clenching-like feeling in the belly; heavy breathing; gravity pull; heavy; baffled; itchy; warm; the tip of the ears get heated up.

And these are the thoughts that came up: unstoppable; mind chattering; this is happening because I am not good enough; oh my God, oh my God, oh my God; I knew this was going to happen.

And the following are the emotions and feelings that people shared: fear; burdened; anxiety; disappointment; remorse; guilt; unsettled; tensed; despair; restless; sad; mood-off.

How much of these are relatable for you?

When we at Kshamtalaya began our work as a Section-8, for purpose, not-for-profit organization working in Kotra block, Udaipur District, in 2016, our big audacious dream was to envision a geography where a system is not failing its people. There is that word again! And that vision drives us even today. It is to create a meaningful, relevant and compassionate education system that supports all students realize their potential.

We do this by creating spaces within schools as Centers of Excellence. We nurture these spaces through democratic learning, well-being, integrated life skills, and continuous dialogues on the values that drive our actions. We also create regional leaders through a fellowship model. We enhance our own theoretical knowledge about children and how they learn, through continuous capacity building of our team. WIPRO's support and providing these opportunities to learn from the best has been remarkable and transformative for us.

For us at Kshamtalaya, we have consciously adopted a work culture that nurtures failures and uses it as an opportunity to learn. Therefore, failure for us (along with all the sensations we experience) have opened the doors of self-reflection.

We do this by asking ourselves questions such as the following. Have we thought of all the possible scenarios? Have we looked through multiple lenses? Are we missing something? What can we change about ourselves? What needs to change in the process? What steps must be added or deleted? What is the next right thing to do? All these questions, almost unequivocally, always lead to more questions.

Dear reader – What are some of the questions that you ask among your team, which help you look at failure through a curious lens?

We identify failure (and proudly so) by watching patterns in data. We have seen connotations in the data that have stood as evidence of what we experienced. It has thrown light on our efforts that need to be strengthened. We have also identified the onset of failures by listening keenly. The more we listen, the more we move toward reflection.

We will now move toward a more concrete explanation of our experiences. These will show how our failures have defined and helped us arrive at where we are today, or not arrive where we ought to be!

Failure in knowing the child

In one of our workshops for teachers, we read aloud "Ashok ki kahaani". The story is part of a book named *Deewar ka istemaal*, authored by Krishna Kumar. It talks about an emergent reader Ashok, who in his early grades, memorizes the alphabet. However, he couldn't read fluently. This eventually leads to irritation and then neglect from the teacher's side. As a result, Ashok drops out of school.

While reading this, one of the teachers present in our Teacher Workshops said, "This story made me believe that there has been a huge gap in our understanding of students' challenges. We only blame the parents. Or we consider that some children don't want to learn or can't learn."

This incident threw light on teachers' perspectives toward students. The teachers sometimes get entangled in logistical challenges. As a result, they struggle to invest in understanding where the child and their problems are coming from.

A more recent failure that we experienced at one of our geographies has had a powerful impact on us. It happened when we noticed some patterns in the data. Despite regular interventions in the classroom, we had not been able to help children achieve foundational learning levels. This was despite the work of a dedicated team of fellows of our organization.

These fellows had been learning, re-learning, and unlearning ways of being and their understanding of the child, day-in and day-out. In their interventions, lots of games, stories, music, and thematic lesson planning lit up the classrooms. However, we realized that there was something very fundamental that we had missed.

Our partners and mentors asked us a few reflective questions. Do we really know the child? What are our interventions working toward?

We immediately stopped and looked at ourselves through a critical lens. Then we structured our interventions to go deeper into each child's learning trajectory. This was followed by the development of a curriculum that helps our fellows know more about the children's lives, the conditions of their living and being.

This has had an impact. It even re-energized our fellows' internal drives and motivation. Within three months, in the same geography, we have been able to bring down the number of students being at a beginner level of literacy from 24% to as low as 3%.

We also realized that we have been underestimating the children's potential. This happened because of us looking at the narrative of learning outcomes through the FLN lens alone. Children are much more capable. It is time that we keep the ceiling higher. Programs such as Learning Festivals by our organization have continuously demonstrated this. Last year we have demonstrated over a thousand products that children have created in these spaces.

From an organizational point of view, it has been a major failure for us in not being able to build an inclusive environment for children with special needs. It has been a limitation specially in the rural, tribal region where

there is a lack of resources to test students' learning disabilities. Even when we identify children with special needs, we have not been able to address their needs professionally.

We are aware of the limitations around expertise in this area. We have asked ourselves what is it that we can do. We have been consistently present. We have also been making genuine efforts to create a compassionate and inclusive environment.

We have realized that no matter what is happening in our children's lives, having one person who shows up every day, someone they can trust, and who tries to give an ear to their experiences, starts making a difference.

Failure in aligning the on-ground partners toward the vision

Intention (check!), planning (check!), mock planning (check!), reflection (check!)

Teachers' turnout - 50%...

In our ongoing quest to align with a shared vision, we navigate a diverse landscape. Here each stakeholder, be it team members, government partners, or CSOs, holds distinct visions. All the stakeholders follow their own unique trajectories. Yet, collectively, each one aspires toward a common goal. This shared objective is to unlock each child's potential. The overarching objective serves as a unifying force.

A tangible illustration of this unfolds in our teacher workshops. Here our focal point is to share the pivotal role of well-being in both the teacher's life and its profound impact on students. Initially, we met with understandable reservations. However, as teachers gradually immerse themselves, they find gratification in the process.

Challenges arise when transitioning it into their teaching practices in the classroom setting. Systemic challenges act as a hurdle for effective implementation. This often does not reflect teachers' intentions.

This issue persists during scaling efforts. Here intermediary layers may momentarily lose sight of the overarching purpose. Scaling often demands dedicated investment in processes. Structured processes guide 'what to do'. However, effectively conveying the nuanced 'how' and 'why' remains a hard-hitting failure.

Failing by relying solely on 'individual brilliance'

Seven years ago, we were a small and growing team. Kshamtalaya was a group of individuals who were fueled immensely by passion. We were a team of five members from different geographies of our country. We all wanted to re-imagine education and learning experiences, where each child realizes her potential.

The organization has now grown into a team of 50. We have realized that passion does play an important role in the work. However, relying on it, or on individual brilliance alone, is essentially planning to fail.

Multiple times in the organization, we failed to meet our goals. Our lack of data hygiene in the beginning year, and our failure to achieve milestones, made us realize that structures and processes play a pivotal role in bringing order while we grow.

We now have governing policies on which we rely. These are our guides in building an organized form of working and being. Structures such as Logical Framework Analysis, rubrics, monthly, quarterly and annual reviews to hold each oher accountable, and data management systems, have helped us become better at data-driven decision making.

The failures in scale

Keeping the essence of what we are doing, the alignment of 'why' behind everything we do, how do we ensure it doesn't dilute with time, especially while we scale? In our

trajectory of growth, we have had to scale our programs from being delivered by five facilitators to 200+ facilitators. In such situations, there is always a risk one must keep weighing around how much of the essence of the vision and objectives of the programs can be replicated.

What role does leadership play here? It mustn't be just left to training alone. Indicators, self-assessment metrices, and continuously learning from the people who are receiving these programs, are some of the checks and balances that helped us scale mindfully. We also have an innate belief that leadership should evidently focus on the inner transformation and mindset shifts. Thus, we must enable the process of learning rather than focus on the output alone.

The journey is the destination, the process is the outcome. Having this conviction and acting on it has unraveled huge takeaways for us. This has stood us in good stead while scaling our programs to the three states we now work in. Perhaps a brief discussion on two of our programs can throw some light on this. One of these is called 'Learning Festivals' and the other is a program designed for teachers' well-being called *Hausla* – 'Confidence/Courage'.

Both these programs stand on the value of focusing on the inner transformation of the program delivery person. They experience every part of the program, reflect, and build their own sense of belief and conviction. We have observed that these facilitators can now own the implementation of the program end-to-end. The Learning Festivals have crossed the mark of 500 festivals over the last seven years. Hausla has reached up to two lakh teachers of Bihar, Rajasthan and Delhi.

Failing to proudly accept failure

Are we prepared and able to recognize and accept failure as an inevitable part of life? Are we giving ourselves the space to accept it as proudly as we do of success? We were surprised and in awe reading an article titled "A CV of Failures" written by Melanie Stefan.

We were particularly drawn to the discussion that it is in our general nature to keep our failures within us, locked away into a tiny little box with heavy locks. How about just sharing it? How about writing posts about it on social media handles? How about creating tools to measure failures so that more organizations can collaborate to address these? It will remind us of this very simple yet profound idea that we are not alone in this.

Our outro thoughts

Just like some songs have an outro, the following are our article's outro thoughts. To quote from J. K. Rowling, "It is impossible to live without failing at something unless you live so cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all, in which case you have failed by default."

We believe that most organizations working in India, especially in the education domain, will resonate with Rowling on this. In an organizational journey, failing is inevitable. In most cases, where there is a race to achieve outcomes at a particular pace and in a calculated time, failures are not encouraged enough.

However, in organizations where failure is nurtured as part of organizational culture, where it is considered as an opportunity to try out new things, it will inevitably bring in innovations. This also opens up the possibility to explore more and keep shifting gears.

Let us share an example of this from our own context. In one of our intervention schools, only four parents turned up for the celebration day of the Learning Festivals Program. This was despite our invitations extended to them through door-to-door visits.

Our team were highly critical to witness this. However, with the help of tools like six thinking hats and Root Cause Analysis, we dug deep to find out the reasons behind the

low turnout. The ability in our leaders to look at failures compassionately allowed the fellows to process this achievement more around "what can I do better."

Moving on, our fellows came up with an idea in the next season. They began to invite the parents by adding *peela chawal* or turmeric-coated rice on their doorsteps. This is the way in the community to invite people for weddings. And lo and behold! More than 40 parents turned out for an event at Government Primary School in Kotra. Our community members claimed, "You invited us with such respect. We simply couldn't miss being there."

Sure, failures help us learn. But just for a moment, let's flip the coin. Maybe, one day the definition of what it means to fail itself might be different. Maybe our society will move toward a culture of acceptance of failures. Maybe the new list of thoughts, feelings, emotions and sensations will look like this -

Thoughts: Oh! No, that didn't work, is it? Oh, what else can I try next time?

Feelings and emotions: Sad but also excited, reflective and optimistic.

Sensations: Tickling sensation in the stomach. And just like that, being a failure is to build resilience.

Maybe, one day, we'll all form a new world order where failures are measured to help organizations recognize each other's scope to grow and collaborate for deeper impact. Maybe we would start a trend #CuriousFailureDiaries and organizations would ask for collaborators to help them resolve that issue, or just simply ask for a space to feel heard!

Shall we begin hashtagging? Tell us your story of failure with a hashtag #CuriousFailureDiaries

Soumya Bhaskaracharya is currently the Director of Kshamtalaya and a musician-in-the-making. She believes that everyone has the potential to create. She has been working with Kshamtalaya since 2017, donning multiple hats and contributed in co-creating and growing the program of Learning Festivals celebrating children's creative potential. She loves to sing, doodle, and watch thriller series/movies.

Pallavi Maheshwari currently leads the Integrated Learning domain in Kshamtalaya. As a Learning and Growth Lead, she has her heart in building joyful, vibrant and safe learning spaces for children. She thrives on building a professional community of educators who can further create effective learning opportunities for children. Pallavi loves to get lost in the world of children's literature on a Sunday afternoon.

Priyanka Rambol works as the Head of Programs in Delhi and Rajasthan at Kshamtalaya. She is a passionate educator and a believer in collective leadership. She is currently bringing coherence between the CSO's vision and mission. She is doing so by strengthening operations and building compassionate and data-driven leadership skills in the Program Managers' cadre for the Delhi and Rajasthan Projects. She loves to read and engage in insightful discourses around problem solving, systems thinking and data-driven strategies.

Website: www.kshamtalaya.org

Email: soumya@kshamtalaya.org

Connect on:

Kshamtalaya

The many meanings of failure and success

Hoshangabad Science Teaching Program in memory

Hridaykant Dewan

At a gathering recently, I ran into a collegemate, someone I had not met for over 45 years. He asked, "You were doing some social service in villages. Did you succeed?" And I went in my mind back to the heady days of working in the schools of Hoshangabad, Shahpur (Betul), and many other places. Leaving aside the irrelevant question of whether it was social service or not (as I never looked at what we were doing as that) I wondered as to how I should answer. Shall I talk about what can be seen today, because the question is asked now? But then I was a part of the effort a long time back, and this effort was at one time known all over the educational circles in the country.

The beginnings of a dream

Hoshangabad Science Teaching Program (HSTP), and the two other programs, of Social Science Teaching and Primary School Program, which rode piggyback on it, were talked about with respect and awe. People flocked to take part in the various activities voluntarily. This included helping with the work, seeing the work in the classrooms, and research and documentation.

People also talked about the program in state and national level conferences. Schoolteachers from the area of work spoke at these and oriented persons considered higher in the hierarchy, including administrative officers of other regions. HSTP has been taught in educational courses of many universities. The organization's work, including all its programs, also started being written about in journals slowly, even internationally.

Many teachers across the areas we worked in called us to their homes for teas and meals. More importantly, the schools' and the classrooms' doors were generally always open to us, as were the offices of the education administration. Looking back, I am surprized at the audacity with which I interacted with the administrative officers and the schools' headmasters. There was a sense of implicit trust and confidence in our intent, if not in our capability to help. I will not bore you with the details and more flashes from my memory. The question is whether this is success or not. What questions do I ask myself to judge success?

To understand this issue, we must consider what we and I were trying to do in that period. Beginning with the attempt to transform classrooms of science in the upper primary section, we embarked on the effort to transform as much of the schools' classrooms as we could. These included all the schools that were governed in some way by the state education department. Since there were common board examinations, the private schools had to also make some of the adjustments that were directed by the government bodies. The journey to plunge into this work was a leap of faith.

I enjoyed doing things that were different, be it cleaning test tubes, or putting together materials to do experiments with, living in new kinds of situations, engaging in conversations that were heady even if presumptuous. The tasks were simple and there was space in that experience for all of us who so wanted to express ourselves and chart out paths. There was a sense of

excitement about doing something that was purposeful and was to be transformative, and the fact that I was not alone in this journey.

There were people with me, and we were together in it. The experience was exciting enough for us to decide to attempt to do this well, to institutionalize it, spread it over a wide geography and extend it to the entire school system. And as we considered the goal ahead and planned, we thought that this would require not just work inside the classrooms and the schools, but outside of these too. So, as the conversations around what we were thinking of doing progressed, the scope of the work became wider and more complex.

The leap that we, and I, took was not based on any sensible evaluation of the challenges. There was also on my part a lack of complete understanding of what the task involved. The attempt's complexity and enormity slowly unfolded. It is still perhaps unfolding in my mind. I don't know how deeply the others who joined the initial efforts had thought about what we were setting out to do and the life we were choosing.

We had many struggles and arguments as we struggled and jostled for our spaces and our ideas. Each of us perhaps needed the vantage space to express their personhood. Yet, despite the frequent tussles and arguments, we were all comforted by the thought of being a group. Lest I convey a wrong impression, it is not that we had walked into something blindly. The decision to make this ambitious effort emerged from years of hard work. However, the dream was impetuous, and as many would have said, naive.

Interfering, intervening, and working with schools

It is important to spend a few lines on the details of what we were trying to do. What we were planning to do was to work inside the governmental school system, and all the branches of it that influenced the school and classroom functioning, and ensure that they changed. Starting with the teaching of the sciences in upper primary classes, we moved to also intervening in the social science classes of the upper primary and primary classes comprehensively.

So, what did this work involve? I use the example of HSTP here to explain this. The first thing was to understand the situation of what was going on in the schools, and based on that think about what alternative approaches should be tried out. Once the broad idea emerged from thinking, observing, interacting with the children and the teachers, and reading (including what was being tried out across the world), then try that in the classrooms, with the teachers and the children in small group settings.

Based on the experience, we developed tentative materials that formed the basic text materials for the schools. These materials were then tried out in schools and modified as per the feedback from multiple sources. This process simultaneously prompted the creation of a concept note on the materials being developed. This included the approach to the children's stage of development, the nature of the subjects taken up, the methodologies and principles through which the desired ideas could be developed in children, and the notions relating to the children's experiences and interests, etc. This list is not comprehensive. But it conveys what any standard curriculum, syllabus and textbook policy document proposes to do. But at that time, this was far from being the tradition.

After this was done, came the second requirement. That was to train or rather orient all the teachers in the new materials that had been developed. And that was another non-traditional thing. The orientation for us was a 'chewed upon' word. It implied participation, conversation and dialogue. It was not to be a training which we would classify as a mere preparation to follow a routine or a procedure. So, our attempt was to develop the ability to construct one's own style of classrooms. So, the interactions were not about telling

but developing a shared understanding. The sessions were long, of three weeks to begin with. They were structured around the materials to be taught and based on interactions involving discussions. The teachers did tasks just like the students would. They debated observations or the data they got, just like their learners were expected to. But obviously all of this happened at a different level. The teachers were to be supported in their work after the orientation by a 'more knowledgeable' person through regular, periodic visits. Additionally, as a part of support and continued orientation, monthly meetings of all the teachers in that area of study were to be organized. This was done in a decentralized manner, covering 25-35 schools.

Then there was the fact that the timetable was to be differently organized. Teaching-learning processes suggested in the program required longer duration than the one period normally available for a subject. There also had to be a system for supplying and replenishing the kit materials for all the programs in the schools. The examinations were also different. The upper primary science program had an open book examination and a traditional exam for assessment of experimental abilities. The common public board examination had this open book examination for many years. And then in the assessment process, while evaluating and before awarding marks, an exercise in redistribution of the assigned marks to different questions was done to make the evaluation more effective.

All of these required major changes in the procedures of administrative functioning, allocation of funds, creation of new structures and positions, among many other things. To make all this possible to an acceptable level from the perspective of the ideas formulated required negotiation, persuasion and persistence in interactions with the administration.

The principle of respect and support for the teachers meant a struggle to build that within the government system. By then it had started looking at teachers as mere low-grade employees. There was reluctance to make arrangements for them, even if they were called for long orientations. There were no residential spaces of even minimal living quality available. There were also no provisions for immediate reimbursement of (leave alone advance for) the travel and daily expenses. The teachers had no agency to deal with the education bureaucracy. There were also no dialogues about the way the school system was functioning across hierarchies to identify and address genuine ground-level problems. All these were set up. A manual of all these principles, functioning norms and rules was brought out and circulated to the district offices.

And then we cut to today and ask, of all these, what remains with and in those schools. The reality of the life outside and inside the schools has changed considerably. For example, government schools' classrooms are no longer over-filled. Children generally don't travel over long distances to attend schools anymore. A large number of teachers no longer live in the community. Their children generally no longer study in the schools they teach in. The relationship of the community with education and schools has also changed.

The administration has changed, and some more systems have been set up. The points of emphasis have changed. There is a regular slew of trainings, as they have become the norm. Schools have been provided with materials off and on, and get sanctions for small purchases and expenses. The classrooms now, however, essentially make efforts to help children memorize and pass. They use a variety of legal shortcuts including procedures learnt through rote. Experiments are absent from the science classrooms. There is no open-book exam or question papers with redistributed evaluation.

Organizations like ours are not welcome generally. CSOs need orders from the higher

authorities to enter schools. Even then, the headmasters may be reluctant. The teachers we worked with have retired and gone. The monthly discussions on academic issues and experiences in the classrooms have been replaced by something else. The books and materials that we created are no longer used. The training processes have also undergone a lot of change.

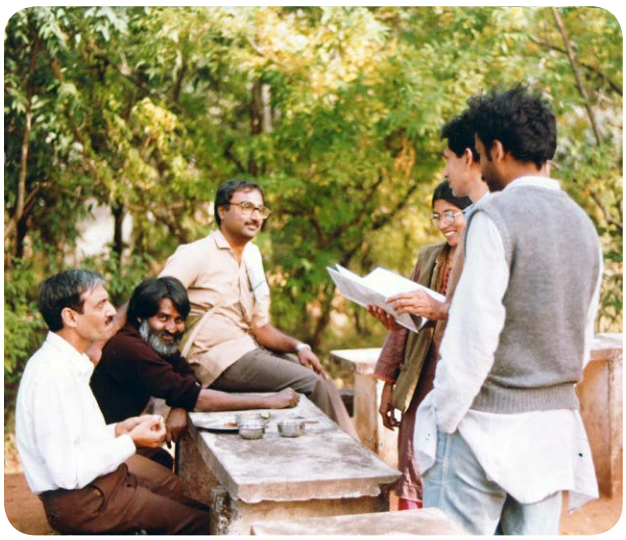
HSTP has become smaller and smaller as a concern in education departments. It has vanished from most discussions. It may remain as a footnote in some, rather than addressed in a full paper. There is not much talk on these in conferences either. Fewer and fewer people in this area of work remember that effort in Madhya Pradesh's schools.

The many meanings of success and failure: a very personal take

So, how does one assess a long-term intervention like the HSTP? I believe assessment was a part of the process that we followed. However, we did not know that while planning and developing the work, we were doing it. We wanted to do the best. We wanted the next training to be good. Therefore, we were recording it, we were discussing it.

And these days, it is not 'we' who decide. Someone else decides that for us. Targets and their achievements have become very critical in assessing efforts, intents and purposes. There is pressure to define precise outcomes, measure them early, repeatedly and quantitatively, and judge the whole process on the basis of the numbers. There may be a need to revisit these trends. These may have started for valid reasons.

But here I am writing about success and failure and how I look at them in the context of my own life and work. Success and failure are normal words to look at performance in the context of individuals and even groups. We win if we succeed in climbing a peak or winning a match or passing exams. It is often expected that the effort toward rebuilding



Eklavya

HSTP group photo (1983-84)

or reconstructing social reality can be and should be assessed in the same way.

People like me ask themselves, as do others, whether we succeeded or not. But it is difficult to assess such experiences and classify them through the neat categories of success and failure. It is a whole journey of carving out an experience, and being a part of the processes that unfold subsequently.

I can only end by sharing the experiences that stand out in my memory. Of the memories that flood my mind, I can share but a few. These are just illustrations. However, they do bring out the spaces for learning, growing and expressing I got as a brash young man, and the ways in which these shaped me and gave my life meaning and purpose.

The first memory is relatively simple to talk about. It is about the daily 'feedback' discussions on what happened in the orientation sessions with teachers on a particular day. The discussions involved not just how the sessions went and the pedagogy followed, tracing the responses and the overall atmosphere, but also intense discussions on areas from what would normally come under elementary science.

People who I held in high esteem as knowledgeable scientists were struggling to make a coherent sense of the outlier

observations from the sessions. There were simultaneously heated arguments happening on conceptual ideas of elementary science. I was struggling to comprehend both the concepts and the intense debates. This made me look at knowledge, knowing and learning afresh. I learnt not just physics, but other sciences and many other ideas there as well. I also realized deeply that we never can learn enough and claim, "I know it."

The second is about relationships with people. Here, I recount an interaction with teachers during one of the monthly meetings at a Sangam Kendra. I had been going to this monthly meeting for over a year. These workshop sessions focused on concepts of science and pedagogy, of what to do to give children appropriate opportunities to learn.

In every meeting, there would be a struggle. I thought that the teachers always tried to distract the meeting by raising issues that were not related to the science and pedagogy we should be discussing. They would complain about everything. This included the fact that they had to come for the meeting, and their travel bills were not cleared, etc.

It happened in every meeting. At first, there would be this venting. Only then we would do some science. However, that day, for some reasons, it went on for longer. Or, maybe, my patience ebbed earlier. We broke up for lunch. And I left them with the question that if they did not feel it was useful, I would stop coming from the next meeting.

After the break, we gathered again. One after the other, they started speaking that the meetings should not stop. The thrust of what they said was this – "It is a forum for us to vent our frustration and anger. You should not take it personally. We say all this because we can. And because you listen. If you want, we will stop complaining."

And that is when the whole conception of what I was doing changed for me. I saw that I had notions about them and me. That I had the burden of doing something to change them. Yet, I was not them and didn't understand their lives. It was a great learning. However, it was extremely troubling too. Once I became aware of this, the understanding started permeating many other occasions.

One is this conversation with teachers on my insistence about why they couldn't find time to read when they went back, or didn't try out the experiment that we had all got very excited about. One of the women teachers politely said, "I go back and have to start looking at the housework." She then described what she had to do before going off to sleep. In the morning, she would finish all the housework before coming to school. I felt ashamed. Here I was thinking of myself as a kindred soul concerned about the learning of children in their schools while they were not even concerned about their own learning.

And then there was the time when I was particularly pushy. I was animated and was urging a group of teachers to do something. The response from one of the teachers was like a blow to the head. She said, "This is your job. You get paid for it. But for us, it is an addition to our job. Would you do my job, while I go around doing what you do?"

Another lesson came from an interaction with a district-level senior officer, an ADIS. These officials, at that time, were incarnations of fear for the teachers. The ADIS and I, with other teachers, were discussing about assessments of answer scripts that we were doing as a team. I was pointing out some things he was not doing right. He was much more senior to me. With all the power that he wielded, he was still listening to my harangue. And then he politely asked very softly, "Are you scolding me or explaining to me." And I was stopped in my tracks. The man with the booming voice had given me a lesson that I am still learning. However, he made me aware of this anxiety in my conversational style.

Let me share another incident relating to the orientation of teachers and the feedback

sessions that followed. The orientation was intense, with many parallel sections, with different resource teams conducting the sessions.

The guiding principles were that the teachers, working and participating in groups, would all engage in experiments, formulate inferences, extract learnings, propose reasons, ask questions, and express their ideas consolidated from these processes. The sessions were open, free flowing and could diverge from the plan. The team members often ended up disagreeing with what had happened during the sessions. This could mean being hauled over the coals during feedback.

The feedback sessions were incisive and critical. The teams reported their observations, which were sometime very critical of the session's resource team lead. Each session was reviewed, as other teams shared their observations on the same chapter. Often the arguments and comments were sharp and biting.

It initially surprized me that perceptions differed so much. Some sessions went on smoothly with nothing much happening. There would be no excitement, no new experiments and no debates. In these sessions, the concluding presentations would also be clear. These would be much appreciated by some. However, I would be dissatisfied with these sessions. To me, sessions with intense discussions, new experiments and questions, where I was also intensely involved, were good sessions. The team, however, didn't find all of them great.

Slowly I realized that these intense arguments and new experiments were often thrown in to disprove obviously false statements, experiments, or discussions, and sorted out tangential questions of specific individuals. These alienated most participating teachers. This was because, then the session just become about those few (sometime just him) and me. The rest of them sat disinterested. Sometimes, they even walked out. The understanding of what participation may mean, and some useful signals for it, emerged from these and other such experiences.

At the end, I must share the memories of my meetings with teachers more than 10 years after the program had been stopped. I was meeting some of them after about two decades. The sharing of details in small conversations, of small moments and the big ideas that we all owned made me feel as if I was back in those times. Their nostalgic wistfulness was not just about missing being young. It also came from a sense of having lost something that was precious to them as teachers and for the school system.

Did we succeed, as the experiences still live on in the minds of some people? And because these perhaps act on all of us in some ways? Or did we fail as the textbooks we created are no longer being used?

Some of the people I discuss, I talked to around 15 years back. A few of them have already passed on. In time, so will the others, including I. What does sustained change mean? What time periods are we thinking of? How do we judge changes and benefits?

Many of the children who went through HSTP have very significantly positive memories about it. However, many do not remember the experience at all. HSTP's students' life trajectories have been varied, as these are for other children too. I remember an old student who travelled a great distance, just to see us once. He said, he tries to get children to do experiments and make things from waste, as a way of passing on what he got from the program. Another alumnus said that they use the HSTP way of thinking in everyday work.

These are just a few stories and anecdotes. However, they still make me fool good and thankful for the opportunities we got to express ourselves and to do what we thought was good for everyone.

To conclude...

So how do I describe my work in that period, as a success or a failure? We wanted to change the education system in a specific way. We put in efforts that were the best to our minds. However, it can be argued that there is no clear, specific movement in the direction we wanted to move things toward.

The science classrooms are now perhaps almost back to where they were before all this. The systems of communication across hierarchies have gone. The long preparation for any kind of orientation (or training as it may be called) does not happen anymore. Teachers are no more exploring and adding to the textbooks and other materials.

However, the idea of periodic capacity building is now embedded in the system. There is talk of creating materials for learning, and having functional libraries and laboratories in schools. The appropriate catchphrases are carried in many materials and used in conversations. But how much of these do we see on the ground today?

Much has changed. But most of it, even that which sounds positive in rhetoric, is detrimental when seen on the ground. There are many worthy papers written on education. These include the presumed or felt influence of this entire effort on the educational processes and indeed on the discourse of education in the country. But can that be ascribed to our work and efforts? Can we say that there was a success? Even though nothing of that spirit and those principles can be seen today after two decades of the closure of the program by the government?

It is difficult to say whether such an (or even a similar) opportunity would present itself to any other group. Indeed, it seems impossible. And it is even more difficult to imagine, if that were to happen, what would be the outcome. And the thought in my mind is whether the memories in our minds, and in the minds of the people who interacted with the ideas and the spirit of the program, are outcomes that we should be happy about. Is it not enough that we tried to do something and made changes in ourselves and what we were doing? We learnt and grew and re-discovered many things. Does that count as success?

Many of us who go into tasks like this, go in with passion and commitment. We may sometime ask tough questions and try to find points of inflection where things started going wrong. In the current scenario, it is the people who support these efforts who drive these questions in the seemingly 'legitimate' quest to find the best models. It is difficult for me to relate to that. Is there a 'best model'? Or are there some good principles that are generic? And the rest perhaps is the attentiveness to relate to the situation with awareness of the principles you started with and not fall into the trap of changing them without realizing it.

Living and doing what you think worthwhile, with strong self-reflection and an urge to do better, is that not the only criterion that should be used for success? I will leave it there, with the note that I/we lived in those moments fully, and so did the people who I was interacting with.

Hridaykant Dewan (Hardy) has been closely associated with Azim Premji Foundation right from the early days, and leads its Translations Initiative, among other responsibilities. As a key member of Eklavya, he contributed to teacher capacity building in Hoshangabad Science Teaching Project (HSTP) and developed various resources for teachers. Hardy has since been working in teacher development, textbook development and elementary education for the last 35 years, with various NGOs, governmental education programs, state governments, and GoI's Ministry of Education. He continues to devote his energies for systemic improvements in our public education system.

Email: hardy@azimpremjifoundation.org

Art of Play Foundation

A reflective journey of a nonprofit startup

Kshitij Patil

Introduction

Art of Play Foundation was started with a vision to make the right to play a reality for all children in India. It was co-founded by three Gandhi Fellowship alumni in February 2016. With all its ups and downs, through a journey of five years, Art of Play got merged in January 2021 with another organization called ELMS Sports Foundation, which works with the same vision.

ELMS Sports Foundation has now launched a separate initiative called Project Chhalaang. Its goal is to promote grassroots sports and play initiatives. One of the co-founders of Art of Play currently heads the initiative.

As part of Project Chhalaang, we now work with close to four lakh students across 2,500 schools in nine states. We have also launched a two-year, full-time fellowship program, called Sports for Transformation Fellowship. Its flagship batch has already completed its first year.

The setbacks along the journey

March 2020 was a landmark month for everyone. The entire world had come to a standstill. We faced a pandemic, the likes of which we had never seen or experienced before.

Just a couple of months ago, in January 2020, in the then Art of Play Foundation office in Delhi, my other two co-founders and I were discussing strategies for the future. We were hopeful and all geared up for an exciting year ahead. We had almost closed the deal with two new, big funding partners recently. We had also closed the continuation of two other programs with our existing funders. We were looking at at least three more potential funding conversations heading in a positive direction. We were discussing how 2020 is going to be the breakthrough year for the organization. We were looking at three-fold growth in terms of the scale of our work.

Cut to August 2020, we had already let go of 80% of our team members. All the funding partnerships that I mentioned earlier had been discontinued indefinitely by the funders. All our attempts at raising some distress funding to survive through the pandemic had failed.

While all of this was happening, we had suddenly started seeing gaps in our product and the programs, which we had been unable to see earlier. Even we, as co-founders, were neither confident nor certain about continuing the efforts to save the already sinking ship.

Throughout the first four to five months of the pandemic, we kept on playing the waiting game. We hoped that things will get back to normal someday. We conducted relief initiatives, ration supply initiatives, and a few efforts to take our program to the children and parents through digital media.

But all of this was not enough. We were doing all of this only as an immediate and essential response to the existing situation. We were not thinking through what was happening around us. We were also not being able to strategically plan for the long haul. This was a major requirement at that point.

On the back of all this, the opportunity for merger was presented to us. Initially we were skeptical of the idea to merge with another

organization. For us that meant Art of Play in its current form would not exist anymore.

However, we also thought that the idea and the vision with which we started will continue to flourish. It seemed to be a great opportunity for us to take what we had started forward. With a few concerns and deliberations, we decided to merge Art of Play Foundation with ELMS Sports Foundation in November 2020.

While reflecting through the journey later, we realized that there was some pattern in the way we had approached many such decisions in the past.

A project in Delhi NCR, in partnership with a big CSR, is another example of it. We were running a very nice boutique project. We felt we were able to make some changes in the lives of children who were a part of the program.

The partnership continued for more than three years. There were constant negotiations with the funding partner. Their feedback was that it was a very cost-intensive program. They felt, with the same budget, we needed to reach out to thrice as many children as there were in the program at the time.

We were convinced with the program's model. We tried to negotiate with the funding partner to continue with slight modifications. The funder decided to discontinue the program. They did not see the value of putting in so much money into a cost-intensive program. With the lack of funds, we also decided to not continue with the program. We stopped working with the children we have been involved with for so long.

Another similar case happened with our flagship program in Ambala, Haryana. We worked there with about 40 schools from April 2017 to Mar 2019. We had finally started

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Beach cricket in Mamallapuram, Tamil Nadu, India

seeing some positive impact through our interventions in the schools. The teachers had started taking initiative in the program. The students had started showing interest. There were more girl students coming up through the program. Some of our program students had gone on to represent the state of Haryana in national level tournaments.

On the back of all this, because of the change in the CSR leadership and shifts in the funding strategy, the only funder for this project suddenly withdrew their financial support with only 15 days' notice.

Throughout the year leading up to this decision, we were hoping for at least 1.5 to 2 times scale-up. This expectation was based on the successful two-year pilot. Again, even here, we decided to stop the program and pulled out the team from the location. We moved them to another project that we were starting in another location.

In another case of a program, we started in Varanasi with 12 schools. The program ran really well for almost a year. The teachers had started showing good results. The Varanasi district education office was also keen on continuing the project.

However, we again failed to get the funders to continue the support. We had to prematurely close the project. The unique part of that project was that it was with Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalays (KGBVs). These are residential governmental schools for girls. We had a great opportunity to build an after-school sports program for the girls. We had also met a couple of exceptional teachers in this project.

In some of our first projects in and around Delhi NCR, with two to three unique small-scale organizations and another organization in rural Assam, we experienced the best and most intimate programs that we had implemented. The partner relationships, and the relationships with the students continue to remain till date, even though the projects ended in or before December 2017.

Back then, we had decided not to pursue these projects for primarily two reasons. The first was because of lack of funds with both the partners. Art of Play could not raise the funds for these programs. Our partner organizations were also not able to figure out the financial support at their level to continue the programs.

We could have continued with these projects. However, we decided to focus on the projects that we had managed to raise the funds for. I still believe that continuing at least a couple of these projects would have given us the necessary grounding as an organization, which we kept on losing throughout our journey.

The two biggest setbacks came following the covid-19 pandemic. One was a CSR partnership that lasted almost four years and it grew slowly year after year. It is one partnership that taught us to be compliant with legal and financial due diligence.

This, by far, remained one of our steadiest partnerships. The project proved to have contributed a lot to the work that we did with only two schools in Delhi NCR. It taught us a lot as an organization. The failure came when we were unable to continue the partnership, as the project closed at the end of 2020 following the pandemic.

The other was a recent, big project that we had successfully started as a big CSR initiative. We were hoping for a long journey with them. However, they pulled out. They stopped the funding, citing the COVID-19 pandemic as a reason.

I have shared here nine stories of setbacks across five different states in India. In a five-year long journey, I am sure I have missed many. However, these are the ones I remember vividly, as the co-founder of an

organization that got merged with another organization, to be able to continue the work that we were doing.

Learning from failures

Based on the reflections from the stories, I end with a few insights. These may contribute to the journeys of organizations who are in pursuit of their mission.

Always firefighting and not having a long-term strategic vision is the biggest mistake as an organization: As an early-stage nonprofit organization that always operated in the survival mode, we had to keep looking for the oxygen every six months. Though it was vital for us to do that to keep the work and the team going, it kept reflecting in our day-to-day operations.

We could hardly focus on the larger picture and make decisions in the interest of the organization's vision. The decisions always stemmed from the survival mode. Thinking back, it is essential for an organization, even in the survival mode, to be able to make difficult, yet strategically important, decisions.

The organization must grow proportionately with the size of the leadership team over the years: We were three co-founders and it proved to be a blessing in the first two to three years. We felt that we were making big strides and things were able to move fast. However, I feel the organization did not grow in terms of scale, work and the budget in the subsequent years to be able to accommodate such a big leadership team.

Documenting organizational experiences and learnings, which helps build sectoral knowledge, is critical: Today, when I sit back and think, I feel we could have done a lot more in terms of being able to document the experiences, insights and knowledge that we were gathering from all our projects.

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At that point it probably felt trivial. However, when we look for resources and knowledge in the domain, there seems to be a big void. We could have potentially helped address these gaps.

No matter how inconsequential it may seem at that point, it is essential for an organization to keep documenting the work. It could prove vital for the organization and the entire sector.

Not having dedicated board members and advisors is especially limiting: We enjoyed our independence. We exercised that with every decision we made. However, we lacked someone who we could pass the ball to and look for their advice. We were in a way not accountable to anyone except our program partners.

As an organization, there was no one who was thinking for the growth of the organization other than the three co-founders. We needed an occasional pat on the back, but more than that, a guiding hand when we were confused.

In conclusion

Passion to do something can take you only that far. Building an organization is a journey that needs much rigor. It is like running a 100-meter sprint versus running a marathon.

Kshitij Patil is the Vice-President, Project Chhalaang, at ELMS Sports Foundation.

Email: kshitij.patil@elmssports.org

A string of failures: roadblocks, struggles and politics

Arvind Sardana

We have been through a long list of failures. More accurately, through situations where curricular interventions that we tried to mainstream for state governments were overturned. This could be for many reasons that we would discuss later. However, here it may suffice to say that we met more devils than what one could contemplate. 'We' here implies the Eklavya social science group that was working with other subject groups, organizations, and university resource persons for initiatives taken by various state governments.

This is a personal account. My colleagues and friends from SCERTs may well view this in a different light. Just as a rider, one may add that there were many achievements and learnings. The survival of some of the initiatives over long periods, sometimes for more than a decade, are significant. This essay does not discuss the achievements though, but the tangible roadblocks and social attitudes that have stifled the spread of these ideas. The focus of this piece is on failures and what didn't work.

The roadblock for Madhya Pradesh

Our first roadblock was after 1995, when we began discussions for the expansion of the social science program in Madhya Pradesh (MP). We had been working in eight schools across three districts for over a decade. The idea was that micro trials in ordinary schools would evolve a model for macro expansion for the state. The textbooks had been revised after extensive feedback from teachers and resource persons. Teacher training processes had also evolved.

Most importantly, we had successfully experimented with an open book system, aligned with curricular objectives for social science. We had carried this on for the Board examination for class 8 at MP. In terms of proof of concept for the program, we had demonstrated the efficacy. It should be appreciated that the state government, through SCERT, collaborated in providing the freedom to change materials, teacher training process and assessment. The coming together of these three processes

Eklavya

Eklavya was formed as an organization in 1982, to take ahead the work of HSTP, the Hoshangabad Science Teaching program, in two ways. First, by extending this program to all the schools in Hoshangabad district, and to selected clusters in many other districts of Madhya Pradesh (MP). Second, to initiate programs for other curricular areas. Its objective was to trial an alternative framework with government schools, which would involve creating textbooks and extensive teacher training and support platforms, developing a new examination pattern suited to the objectives, and working with government structures to spread the ideas. These became the key pillars for subsequent programs such as the Social Sciences and Primary School initiatives. Eklavya was deeply involved with these three curricular programs from 1982 to 2002 in MP. Later on, the ideas generated from this experience were shared and experimented further with NCERT and various state governments.

was envisaged to lead to changes at the classroom level. This liberal space for experimentation appears unimaginable today.

The senior bureaucrats then asked for an evaluation study. We had begun this, culminating later as a report and then as a book edited by Poonam Batra. There was another question. How does one prepare the ground for acceptance of an innovative program by a larger region and community of teachers?

The government suggested that the proposal for the new initiative should come from Zila Panchayat Samitis. Following this, we took up meetings in earnest. We met with people across the board. We had meetings with teachers, administrators, elected representatives, and intellectuals. We also felt this would prepare the ground and some 'middle' path would emerge.

What was unsaid at the government level (but an undercurrent that one could feel) was that social science is controversial, and the government shouldn't get caught in some crossfire. "Let us expand primary school first and we'll come to this later," was the bureaucratic response. This appeared fair for that time, since we were collectively involved in the primary school initiative. However, it was also a way to postpone taking a call on the expansion for social sciences.

The proof of concept (that the program works on the field, within government schools and structures) took us so far but no further. My senior colleagues from the science program were only smiling. They were also stuck at a similar stage. This was after having worked out the program, HSTP, over 800 schools, seeding these ideas across 13 districts and with a positive evaluation report from MHRD.

By 2000 however, there were changes, both at the bureaucratic and political levels. At a bureaucratic level, from the earlier engaging and sympathetic bureaucracy, there was a clear indication from some that, "Government schools can't be improved." The government had deregulated the school act. Almost anyone could start a private school in a couple of rooms. "You are well-intentioned but wasting your time," was an advice from a very senior bureaucrat.

The other indication was that governments desire their own flagship programs. They do not wish to be identified with civil society initiatives. At a political level, both the major parties now stood in opposition - one openly and the other internally. The same Zila Panchayat Samitis that we were encouraged to interact with, were now used against us. Motivated resolutions were passed there that the community did not desire these innovative programs developed by Eklavya.

Supported through this manufactured dissent, the topmost bureaucrats now argued that Eklavya enjoyed an 'illegitimate' space within government structures. All our programs were closed by Government of MP in 2002. Even when some scientists argued that the state government should continue the programs on its own, without Eklavya, there was no response. Proof of concept was considered irrelevant. The detailed circumstances leading to this can be read in our report, "New beginnings". Others have also commented on this (Batra 2015).

A question is often asked, "Were we naïve to think that governments would expand curricular programs if provided with proof of concept, like farm trials for agriculture?" Does the trajectory operate from micro to macro, as we had visualized in our proposals?

In one sense, we knew that expansion is a political exercise. Yet, to maintain neutrality as collaborators, we shied away from direct political engagement. Maybe we were unsure, or not capable, of engaging with political parties and their functionaries. At the same time, this was the best use of the negotiated liberal spaces that civil society groups had in the 1980s. The challenge of those times was

Eklavya

to develop alternative development programs not only in education but also in other domains such as watershed development and community health.

The social science program had been worked out on the ground in collaboration with the state government for ordinary schools. This opportunity gave the ideas a solid base, a democratic possibility of quality education for all, and probably a life that was much larger than the initial group.

Faced with a limbo, we started moving out and also began explorations for classes 9 and 10. This was necessary, since in our system classes 6 to 10 constitute the phase of general education in all subjects. For many years the question, "What is the link to high school?" had been posed to the science program.

This was the background to a genuine debate that innovative programs emphasize process elements enhancing the capacity to learn, but they tend to ignore "essential subject knowledge" (NCERT 1991).

Among other questions often posed to us by elected representatives were, "Are these watered down programs for rural or marginalized regions?" Questions of this nature and a public dialogue had been initiated through our meetings with the Zila Panchayat Samitis. This initial work for classes 9 and 10 was very useful later, where the framework for state governments was clearly for alternative textbooks for classes 6 to 10.

Rajasthan and Pokharan

While the state government was ignoring the expansion in MP, we had the opportunity to work with an initiative in Rajasthan, called Lok Jumbish. This was a semi-autonomous body set up by Government of Rajasthan (GoR), under the leadership of Anil Bordia. The goal was to intervene in selected blocks all over Rajasthan for improving school education. The intervention was at the level of infrastructure, community engagement and curricular materials.

We were part of the teams working on alternative curricular materials. The trial block was Pisangun of Ajmer district. We brought out the class 6 social science book with fresh case studies from various districts of Rajasthan. We were in the process of completing the class 7 textbook, when Pokharan took place.

This nuclear test in 1998 in Pokharan immediately set up a strong reaction from the Swedish government. Their development agency, SIDA, the main funder for Lok Jumbish, withdrew the support. The anti-Bordia camp within the state government took this opportunity and began the winding down of Lok Jumbish. We were caught in the crossfire. We produced case studies detailing our efforts at contextualization for the state. These were created in collaboration with spirited resource persons from universities in Rajasthan. However, these were ignored.

The new textbooks were termed as "plagiarizing the MP textbooks" by the accountants. Our funds were held up. We entered the long loop line of negotiating with officialdom. Meanwhile, the SCERT at Udiapur had felt sidelined by Lok Jumbish in the curricular process. This governmental body didn't even consider adapting or using any of the textbook materials that various teams had created, designed and tested in the trial block. They were simply buried.

The textbooks were buried. But we learnt what it means to contextualize. I remember a question posed by a scholar at IDS, Jaipur. "You are trialing at Pisangun block. But what is your universe?" This experience stood us in good measure for more than a decade (Paliwal and Subramaniam, 2006).

Outsiders at Assam

Around the same time, probably in 2001, we were invited by Government of Assam (GoA). We were asked to work with the SCERT to develop new textbooks for their middle schools. We took this up with enthusiasm and began meeting various resource people at Guwahati University. The response was very encouraging. However, a comment in one meeting couldn't escape our notice. During a discussion, one of the professors said, "But in India they think differently from us..." I don't remember the context, but his words stuck. We were 'outsiders,' from 'India'.

Eklavya

The SCERT here was quite active. It was prepared to undertake the required field studies. We could discuss most issues. However, some aspects were sensitive. When it came to Assam's history, often myths were placed as sacrosanct. The issue of migrants was very touchy. Internal conflicts within the state were also rampant.

A group of teachers on a field visit for a case study of a hill region were turned back by the locals, who said, "We don't allow outsiders." They were shocked and explained that they were government schoolteachers from a different area. However, it didn't help.

We completed the class 5 textbook. We had begun working on class 6, when we were asked to pack up. There were changes at the level of upper bureaucracy, and they were closing this initiative. A section in the ruling political group, viewed this whole effort as done by outsiders. We hadn't contemplated that cultural divides among even well-intentioned people would be so strong. The professor's chance remark rang true.

Chhattisgarh: a long innings

We didn't expect our engagement at Chhattisgarh (CG) to be a long one when we started work on the textbooks in 2004. This was the result of a series of unlikely events. The SCERT Director then was a very capable administrator. He was an officer deputed from the forest department, with a deep interest in education.

In his quiet way, he invited various groups to come together and work with the faculty

The schedule of engagement with Chhattisgarh's SCERT

2004 to 2008: Class 1 to 8 textbook writing for all subjects. As a new state, it sought to establish its own identity.

2009 to 2011: New D.Ed. curriculum to align with the reforms suggested by NCF.

2012 to 2014: Teacher training through Open/Distance Learning to fulfil RTE requirements.

2014 to 2017: Textbook writing for classes 9 and 10 for all subjects to align with the NCERT textbooks.

2018: B.Ed. To align with changes as suggested by NCTE, for a two-year course.

and teachers at CG. He would listen to suggestions from all quarters. However, he was also able to keep out petty politics that could derail processes. He helped set up mixed teams. These included members from civil society groups, SCERT faculty, teachers, and some university faculty.

There was also an enthusiasm to do something for the identity of the state. Our case studies for geography, economics and history were an opportunity for teachers to contribute effectively. This also bound us all as a group representing social sciences. In a quiet manner, we were able to introduce processes that had not been possible elsewhere. The textbooks went through a trial process for two years in selected schools across various regions. This was a seeding process before the state level expansion. This worked out to a reasonable extent.

The process of teacher training needs meticulous planning and organization. We did have a reasonable team of teachers as the state resource group. But the plan to take this to every district or block did not materialize. Changes at the helm of SCERT and the bureaucracy took away the momentum.

The shortcut adopted almost everywhere is the circulation of training modules. This is not a substitute for actual dialogue on the perspective of the new textbooks. Classroom processes don't change unless this human element is given space. On hindsight, we should focus on this first, and build a conducive climate and teachers' groups. Then textbooks could be developed as a follow up. Rather than textbooks leading the change, teacher dialogues should create the ground first.

Unlike other situations, textbooks for middle schools in CG were used for more than a decade. However, the academic resource group was hardly consulted once they were used across the state. There is a dilemma here. The CG SCERT, unlike in MP, did take ownership as desired and conducted the program on its own. Textbooks for elementary education classes were put in place.

However, SCERTs are often uncomfortable in exercises of review and revision of textbooks. Their reluctance stems from the experience that university academics do reviews and offer advice. However, the latter seldom see them through the entire process of revision. Textbooks are sensitive subjects. Hence, SCERTs tend to rely on a small set of identified teachers and stick to minor changes.

These textbooks at CG became convoluted later because of the processes set by NCERT around 2018. Their learning outcomes initiative may appear well-intentioned. However, it took on a mechanical form. This was because for testing, NCERT started using content-specific questions rather than a skill-based design. This was clearly pushing uniformity in content through the back door. Textbooks for the states that did not cover specific content would be at a disadvantage. More abstract understanding of learning outcomes as a set of desired skills and the ability to handle abstract concepts was given the bypass. NCERT clearly lacks the vision of

a federal structure to allow and enhance a plurality of text materials.

The bureaucracy clearly saw this signal. It did not want to be pulled up for low scores. It either changed to using NCERT textbooks fully or modified them accordingly. The teachers at CG put up a brave front. We were not invited but received informal phone calls from concerned teachers. The geography section was replaced by the ill-informed and outmoded NCERT content.

Eklavya

However, the case studies relevant to CG were retained. In the drive to reduce load, many chapters were merged. Contextualization for the state took a back seat.

The textbooks for middle school in this remixed form remain to date. The ownership remains with the SCERT. The initiative survives changes in government because SCERT took the lead and also set the agenda. The crucial factor, as pointed out by a colleague, is that the new textbooks were for all subjects and developed with the involvement of mixed and diverse groups.

The CG SCERT was able to manage a diverse group of people drawn from Eklavya, Vidya Bhavan, Digantar, Azim Premji Foundation, and also resource persons from Ravi Shankar University, Delhi University (DU), Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Azim Premji University (APU) and Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS). There were negotiations and suggestions and an open mind. But it also ignored many elements that one might consider crucial.

We were later invited to work on classes 9 and 10 after the responsibility for curriculum for high school was shifted to SCERT from the Board. Through this initial process, the CG SCERT had developed a trust that they could seek help from resource groups and university people. The CG SCERT was responding both to the pressure and opportunities of its time. It had the leadership to carry out macro changes with a clear mandate to complete the agenda for the state. These macro decisions were influenced by various considerations, some pertaining to the state and some coming from the center.

Macro initiatives follow policy decisions that cover specific and limited segments. Ground level changes at the school or classroom demand synergy and dialogues with teachers and the confidence of the local school administration. It also assumes a degree of reasonable functioning of the schools. These are often missing. Hence you don't see results at the classroom level.

Andhra Pradesh-Telangana: "Let there be no distraction"

In 2010, the SCERT of undivided Andhra Pradesh initiated an ambitious program to develop their own curricular materials. This came out of the chaos of using NCERT textbooks for English medium sections and state textbooks for the Telugu sections in selected government schools.

When we began, there were two groups within the SCERT and the set of selected teachers. One was dynamic with exposure to pedagogical change. The other wished to maintain the status quo. In an early meeting on syllabus and methodology, one of the SCERT staff members grew upset. He interjected in our discussion saying, "Sir, let there be no distraction."

He then proceeded to distribute plain white sheets of paper to all the teachers, saying that he wants the syllabus and chapter outline completed that very day. And the

groups would then begin writing the chapter assigned to them from the next day. This was the traditional method. It stands to the credit of the other group that they negotiated these conflicts. We were able to experiment with a new thematic approach. This was much appreciated later.

Here again, the overall teacher group was very active. It had the additional advantage of being able to read alternative materials or articles in English. The discussions were conducted in a multilingual frame. We had the support of active resource persons form Osmania University, Hyderabad Central University and APU. Like in CG, the reform process was for all subjects, from class 1 to 10. Mixed teams drawing from many groups were formed.

The SCERT followed the rule book for approval of materials. It ensured a trial phase. It also gave time for discussions on sensitive issues with the teacher group. It devised an academic standards outline and a chapter schedule for the schools as well. This groundwork was very creditable, as documented in a presentation by Upender Reddy.

There was a strong and committed teacher resource group. However, the process of teacher dialogues ran out of steam. The plan was to form district level teams and then conduct workshops for teachers at the mandal or block level. Compared to other SCERTs, they were best placed to do so. Teacher dialogues and orientations at the state level must face the challenge of scale. While we were not in favor of a cascading model, one or two steps become inevitable. The idea was to go further from the state team to the district level teams, and may be the block level.

From our previous experience in MP, we realized that discussions on perspective are crucial to build confidence and trust. Issues of content and pedagogy emerge in a healthy way when the perspective has been discussed and some of the chapters are gone through in detail. In Telangana, the teachers were quite prepared and motivated to take up the challenge of district and block level workshops.

Some workshops were held. However, this was not a priority for the SCERT. Therefore, it lacked serious planning and lost its momentum. This was a rare opportunity that was missed. The teachers conducted the workshops, but with no resource person support. Nor was the essential kit supplied to the schools. No follow-ups were planned.

The lesson was clear again. Teacher dialogues must take place in tandem with textbook development. Teachers are always in a dual role. The first one is as bearers of given textbook materials to be transacted. The second role is that of autonomous persons engaged with teaching and learning in the classroom. We must move some steps toward thinking of teachers as people with their own minds and engage with them. We must not treat them as mini-bureaucrats responsible for following the given textbooks.

After the formation of Telangana, there was some revision of materials. These textbooks for classes 6 to 10 were taught for a decade in both the states before new developments intervened. Government of AP, around 2020, decided on English medium for all government schools. Hence, it introduced NCERT textbooks form class 8 onward. They also changed chapters totally for classes 6 and 7, bringing out new bilingual textbooks. That was the end of the story for AP.

Eklavya

Telangana continues with the textbooks. It was able to respond to critiques questioning the portrayal of the country in some of the chapters through a process that was open and transparent.

In AP and Telangana, the resource group was able to suggest a new format for the Board examination at the class 10 level. This would move a few points toward higher order skills and test for reasoning, comparing, extrapolation and articulation of ideas. Surprisingly this has sustained, and was followed with some rigor for the first five years.

A similar move at CG didn't yield many results. The mindset of the Board at CG remained the same. This was even though the internal questions and perspective of the textbooks had changed.

The conflict between the Madhya Shiksha Mandal and the SCERT eroded the credibility of the textbook in CG. This is a serious gap of perspective that one observes between NCERT and CBSE as well.

What we didn't plan, and push for, was active involvement and dialogue with senior Board officials responsible for examination, the set of teachers who check answer scripts at the Board level, teachers who set papers for local school examination, and local school administrators who tend to judge schools and teachers by exam results.

This is a difficult task. However, the textbooks should have been developed with this group in active dialogue and securing their confidence for change. Classroom processes don't change unless assessment patterns change. Assessment patterns have a far-reaching impact on classroom processes. We must stop judging teachers and schools by examination results. We need to devise alternative forms of monitoring for the school administration.

Eklavya

Bihar: A strong teachers' group, but totally dysfunctional school systems

In Bihar, we did expect to be in a land of acute contradictions. However, we had not anticipated that it would strike at every step. My colleagues had participated in resurrecting the SCERT from the dilapidated building and grounds that had been encroached by neighbors, along with their cattle and stray dogs. When we met for workshops around 2010, the teachers' energy was great. The discussions were very lively. But there was an undercurrent of cynicism.

One of the teachers during the second workshop came to meet me in my room. With a twinkle in his eyes, he said, "I like the workshop. However, the textbooks won't come out in time. The guides will appear first. I don't want to discourage you. But I thought, I'll let you know." He was correct. Hardly anyone at the school used textbooks.

Teachers' involvement, their understanding of ground realities, the ability to write out case studies, and the use of folk literature, was really heartening. They were well-read. With a sense of humor, a teacher came up with a true-life account of everyday discrimination by teachers at the school level, and challenged the group to use the story.

When the textbooks were finally printed, the quality was horrible. The pictures were all ruined. The font was small and the headings were merged. The paper was of newsprint quality. The interlocking supply chain from paper to printer was too strong to intervene in. We satisfied ourselves with an internal letter of protest.

The ground situation of the middle schools for whom these textbooks were meant was equally disturbing. The demand for schooling was high, with acute shortage of classrooms and teachers. OBC and Dalits were entering schools in a big way. One participant jokingly remarked that he was glad only 60% of the enrolled children came to school. "I don't have the space if all attend," he said.

On the other hand, a village school, where the panchayat was active and had helped to construct additional classrooms, was filled with students. For additional teachers, they had recruited guest teachers from the Maha Dalit communities. It clearly demonstrated what was possible. In general, schools were dysfunctional. Almost everyone who could afford attended both the school and a coaching center as a matter of routine.

The SCERT, to its credit, had created a vibrant teacher group of nearly 500 teachers across subjects and classes. They also represented various districts of the state. We felt helpless at times. However, it is remarkable that amidst all the chaos, teachers saw hope.

They were probably wiser and had seen more acute phases of conflicts and crises. They were very keen to carry this momentum to the district level. Plans for teacher meetings were drawn up.

But the bureaucracy had other plans. A change at the helm led to a strong rift between the SSA Project Office and the SCERT. SSA began to debunk the perspective of the new textbooks. These signals grew strong. The plan to organize teacher workshops and take this momentum to the field was allowed to sink. The textbooks remained. These are still being used without any support or scaffolding.

In lieu of a conclusion

When one turns around and looks behind, there's hardly anyone, among state or non-state actors, whom one would recognize as

Eklavya

attempting curricular changes at a state level today. But why am I looking for country cousins? Hasn't the world changed in the meanwhile? There's both some urge and a hesitancy in writing about what the future holds for NGOs who are working with the government structures and may be also for curricular changes.

From experiences in the recent past, it is clear that spaces for experimentation would be limited. Yet this is an area that should not be ruled out. If the focus on FLN remains, it may be possible for groups to involve SCERT or education departments for ground trials, so that functional and meaningful models adapted to the social context emerge.

Should states adopt NCERT books or develop their own? This is a likely debate that we may encounter in the coming years. We may see a push and even popular pressure toward centralization, rather than helping states aim for contextualization. Groups could contribute toward a curricular critique and public debates.

And it would be best for them to engage with teachers dialogues, negotiate space, and encourage teachers to experience the use of alternative materials in their own classrooms. And classroom processes must be allowed to lead the change. This is not easy though.

We had experimented with voluntary teacher peer groups in MP. Similar models at much larger scale were tried out with APF in Rajasthan and elsewhere. Here groups are formed of those teachers who are interested. Hence, they self-select. This is an experience

that has lessons for the future. One probably requires both structural interventions in textbooks and examinations, and voluntary teachers' peer groups, working together.

A fundamental change that has taken place is that mass education now includes a large section of low-fee private schools. These often cater to the poorer sections. The school structure has acquired many layers. This is true for private unaided schools. A similar process of differentiation has happened within the government school system as well. There are serious levels of inequality among these various layers. These can be seen in terms of functionality, access and quality.

Macro pressures of both the state and the market impact schools. The issues of dysfunctionality and governance are of prime importance. This is because curricular changes are meaningless in a dysfunctional atmosphere. CSOs must consider this changed scenario, while seeking forms of engagement with the government school structure.

Encouraging SCERTs to make concerted effort to change assessment pattern by working with school examination Boards has been neglected. This may move the school administration away from using results of tests and examins to monitor teachers and schools, and explore other modes of monitoring.

Well, these are some thoughts and suggestions for correcting course, or simply "...a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

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Arvind Sardana has been a member of the social science team at Eklavya since 1986. He has been subsequently involved with curricular efforts at NCERT and with various state governments.

Website: eklavya.in

Email: arvindewas@gmail.com

Connect on:

Eklavya

Has a school failed, if it had to be shut down?

Remembering an alternative school

Jane Sahi in conversation with Thejaswi Shivanand

Jane Sahi has taught in an alternative school near Bengaluru for several years. She has, until recently, been engaged in teaching at the Library Educators' Course at Bookworm in Goa. She is presently involved in The Fig Tree Learning Centre, which works with local government schools, particularly in relation to library activities and sessions with children, looking at nature through observations, stories and artworks. She has written several books including "In our own words" which is about how to support children's independent and creative writing. She has taught courses related to language pedagogy and children's literature at Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai, and at Azim Premji University (APU), Bengaluru.

Thejaswi: Jane, you and a core group of teachers ran Sita School from 1975 until 2017. That was a long journey, but then things had to end. It would help if you could share some highlights of how it was in the early days, the times when you had doubts if this is something you could sustain, but then you found ways to go ahead. I think it would be useful if you could start with the genesis of Sita School and then share what it has been like over the years to sustain the school.

Jane: The school started in a very organic way. We had lived in a Muslim *mohalla* near Channapatna in 1970. When we moved there, most of the children were participating in the cottage industry of making bidis. The families had formerly been involved in lacquer work. However, because of mechanization, they had shifted to making bidis.

We lived in a room given by the village. We were observing and watching these very young children sitting in family groups and making bidis. The children were not very strictly controlled. But they were expected, even from quite a young age—I'm talking about 6-7 years olds—to be involved in making bidis. So, that was quite an eye-opener in terms of thinking about what might be relevant to such children as a way of learning. In a way, we started there.

Thejaswi: When did you move to Silvepura?

Jane: We were there near Channapatna for a year. And then in 1971 we moved to the village where we stay today, in Silvepura, which is north of Bengaluru. At that time most children did not go to school. Many of them might have attended school very erratically for two or three years, dropping out by the third or the fourth standard. Two or three children had gone on to complete tenth standard. However, those children had been in residential schools. Otherwise, none of the villagers' children had gone beyond lower primary classes.

The children of the people who helped build our house - carpenters, masons, etc. - did not go to school. The school, as I mentioned, began in a very organic way in our living space. By that time, we had two of our own small children. The other children came and played with our children and their toys, and painted and drew. But there was no fixed timing, and it was extremely informal.

Thejaswi: How did you inform yourself of working with children at that stage? Was it only through observation?

Sita School

Jane: In 1973, when I met David Horsburgh, I felt ill-equipped to work in a school situation, especially with my minimal knowledge of Kannada.

David was encouraging and recommended about 10 books that I should read. These included Herbert Kohl's *36 Children* and books by John Holt and A. S. Neil. There was a book called *The philosophy of primary education: an introduction* by R. F. Dearden, which was a basic but insightful book. He also suggested some practical books on language teaching and math. I began to seriously consider the possibility of a more structured learning space but with vertical grouping, so that children could both learn from each other and from the different activities we did together.

I was extremely interested in Rudolf Steiner. I was attracted to his ideas of integrating art across all subjects. Through a friend, I contacted Emerson College, the Waldorf Teacher Training institution in England. I requested for a volunteer to come for one year to work in the school. Fortunately, one remarkably gifted person responded. She stayed with us for two years.

For me it was like an apprenticeship! One of the best things about her was that she kept emphasizing that Rudolf Steiner's historical and cultural context was Europe. We in India were in a different situation. It was, therefore, impossible to simply attempt to uncritically transplant a Waldorf approach in a village in Karnataka in the 1970s.

We adopted or adapted some elements of the Waldorf approach. However, the way the school took shape was largely due to the responses and contributions of the children, parents, volunteers and teachers over a number of years.

Thejaswi: I have a feeling that contemporary Steiner schools in India have much to learn from that approach of thinking about appropriate, contextual learning.

Jane: We followed a rather eclectic approach. We drew inspiration from Rudolf Steiner, Gandhi and Tagore. Later, I was greatly influenced by the writings of Martin Buber. These provided a more philosophical perspective, yet rooted in practice. His texts prompted me to reflect on why we teach, how we teach, and how we learn as teachers.

These questions have stayed with me throughout the years.

Thejaswi: Was this journey part of understanding why you wanted to start a school? It sounds to me more like exploring schooling in an open way, more than starting a school.

Jane: We had informally begun around 1973. But I suppose, as Sita School, we began in 1975. Exploring these many approaches happened before and after the school started. We started by trying to understand why children were not attending school. Although there was a convent school in the village, it failed to inspire children to enroll there. At that time, I recognized the importance of inclusion in a broader sense. It was about embracing the diversity of everyone's learning journey, rather than fitting them into a predetermined mould of success or failure.

Thejaswi: What were your observations of children in the village at the time?

Jane: In the village community, children of all ages learned together, from each other. There was never a sense of failure. Children were included at their own pace. Some children embraced their differences, despite any challenges they may have faced, and there was a genuine acceptance of diversity.

Thejaswi: I have often heard you speak about observing children in their context. There were moments where you witnessed them learning from each other. Over the years, this seemed to occur consistently in any space you observed. This observation influenced how you structured the classes.

Jane: So, yes, that led us to consider more of a vertical grouping rather than the horizontal grouping, which recently has been reinforced by the Right to Education (RtE) Act for various reasons. The RtE Act emphasized the idea that children shouldn't be 'left behind,' deeming it discriminatory not to propel them

Sita School

forward. While there were valid reasons for this approach, I believe we can also question whether age is the only criterion that determines how children are grouped. A space to be curious and explore things individually and together, and a facilitator who encourages children to collaborate, may contribute to a richer learning environment.

Another aspect I noticed was the way children demonstrated responsibility through their work. Without romanticizing, children's participation in purposeful work can often be very positive. At the same time, it is crucial to acknowledge the existence of labor laws that identify instances of child exploitation.

Thejaswi: Living in a rural community often entails participating in local activities, such as farming. Even today, children during harvest times may participate in these activities instead of attending school. Despite concerns about labor laws and exploitation, in certain situations, being involved in community activities is part of a rural child's life.

Jane: Yes, traditionally children were clearly an integral part of a bigger community. There was a natural discipline in the context of participating in activities involved in providing shelter, food and care for each other.

Another aspect I have noticed is the freedom of movement children had in the village. Nowadays, children's lives are highly monitored and scheduled, nearly always under adult supervision. At that time, it was refreshing to witness how children could

choose who they spent time with and where they went. There were restrictions, of course, as children were only allowed within the village boundaries and agricultural land. However, within that space, they enjoyed some freedom of choice.

The children also played a significant role in shaping the school's evolution. Coming from a Western background, we initially had notions of individual choices and facilitating children to do what they wanted. However, we soon realized that in this context, children often preferred to work together, and an individualistic structure wasn't always appropriate.

We had initially envisioned catering to kindergarten-age children. However, by the end of the 1970s, this quickly changed. Older siblings, who had never attended school, expressed a strong motivation to explore possibilities. How could we turn away children in that situation?

Thejaswi: Since you started the school in the 1970s, did it evolve in a planned manner, or did you learn as you went along?

Jane: When people ask me how to start a school, I am always a little hesitant to tell them that we didn't have a five-year plan. It might have seemed unstructured. However, our focus and commitment were always on responding to the children's needs as far as we were able.

Guided by Steiner's ideas for young children, learning was deeply rooted in the local environment. Children learned about home life, clothing, agricultural practices, and more, using these as pathways to literacy and numeracy. We drew inspiration from Gandhi's idea of correlation, emphasizing the interconnectedness of things rather than decontextualized, disembodied learning.

Initially, the children were not working toward any formal certification. Gradually that changed. Some students were prepared for the seventh-grade public exam. This would enable them to progress to high school or to take courses in vocational training that were available at the time.

Thejaswi: You also had to meet the needs of a number of children, which involved many individuals including yourself. How did your relationship with the school influence your identity as a person?

Jane: Over its 40-year span, the school experienced its share of ups and downs. With a team of four members and generous support from volunteers, we navigated through various challenges. In the 1990s, I came to realize that one drawback of working in such a context is that your entire identity can become intertwined with your work and the school.

This realization led me to understand that the work is vital and integral to my life. However, it shouldn't consume my entire identity or impose on another's. There is a danger in projecting a teacher's expectations or the lack of them on to children, instead of giving them space to make their own choices without judgment.

It took me 25 years to recognize this imbalance. The school is certainly not my school. It is embodied in the teachers, the children, and the ongoing changes. Looking back, it surprises me that it took so long to realize the negative implications of this identity fusion. While it provides energy, it doesn't necessarily sustain when faced with change.

Thejaswi: Your insight is fascinating. When the school becomes your identity, as someone who was there from the beginning, you realize that it is a two-way street. The work occupies a significant space in your mind. The school also relies on how you support and hold it together.

Jane: I believe it was in 1998, when I took a year off from school, that I was able to see

the need to take some distance and yet at the same time be deeply involved.

I wanted to pursue further studies, which turned out to be a very positive experience. Stepping back allowed me to see the school within a broader context. The rapid social, cultural, economic and political changes of the 1990s helped me understand the various forces at play. These also made me realize that the school was just one possible response to the challenges.

Looking back, I see that the school served a purpose. Many children who attended would not have otherwise had access to education or exposure to different opportunities. However, it became clear that the school had its time and place.

Thejaswi: Why do you say that it had served its purpose?

Jane: One of the biggest challenges was coming to terms with people's changing aspirations for certification, which did not necessarily coincide with actual learning. We had to acknowledge and understand that, only by chance, we had the resources, privileges and connections to make decisions for others. I read a book by Lisa Delpit during that time. It was pivotal for me in recognizing that people should have control over their own lives. As society underwent significant changes, it became increasingly possible for individuals to exercise that control.

Thejaswi: In traditional societies, opportunities for change were limited. Many people remained within that framework. However, after the 1990s, the pace of change accelerated remarkably, and we observed these shifts.

Jane: Trying to grasp what was happening was a zigzag, uneven but significant journey. After two decades, it became evident that the world was changing in a way that required a different awareness from the one with which the school began.

Alternative schools have existed for a long time, dating back to the mid-18th century. When we discuss these, I believe it is essential to consider not just the specific details but the underlying reason for being alternative. The essence of being alternative lies in questioning dominant forces that may be unjust and oppressive to people.

In this region and throughout India, most children are now enrolled in school. However, the crucial question remains: What are they doing in school? Are meaningful opportunities being provided, or are schools merely reinforcing a sense of failure? Being in school should be empowering. However, for some children, it can, unfortunately, be a disempowering experience.

Thejaswi: When you realized that changes were beyond your capacities or interests in addressing as a school, did you then decide to close it?

Jane: It took us, as a group, some time to realize that we needed to close the school and start anew, doing similar things but in a different context. The transition took eight years, from 2009 to 2017. It began from the moment we understood that the RtE Act was going to make it impossible to continue as we were, to when we actually shut down.

We explored alternatives. These included offers of assistance to obtain registration. However, it didn't feel right at that time. Registration and recognition would not necessarily have given the freedom to practice a more equitable or democratic mode of schooling.

After 2016, we took one year to assess our resources and organize our affairs. It was a challenging period because there were no children present. Suddenly, the bustling atmosphere of the school was replaced by an empty, silent space.

During this time, we worked, we reflected on what had been and what could be in the

future. Among other things, we organized the library. We also began reaching out to local schools to explore potential collaborations. But we felt it was important not to rush into something new. It was critical to allow ourselves that space to make a transition.

Thejaswi: What happened in the transition period over the next few years?

Jane: Eventually, we decided to work in three schools. Initially, we worked in a convent school. However, that proved to be unsatisfactory. We withdrew after one year. Over the next five years, apart from the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and the attendant lockdowns, two of the team members have been actively involved in three nearby governmental primary schools.

The focus has been on environmental studies and literacy, including setting up classroom libraries. We have been fortunate to have been able to collaborate with NCF (Nature Conservation Foundation).

Most recently, we have been again reconsidering our options. In April, we made the decision to start a small learning center in the nearby village of Kempapura. Here, the government school was the least effective. The teacher welcomed us as a support for her to have free time. However, there was little engagement with the work that the facilitators were doing.

Meanwhile, the children, mostly migrant children from north Karnataka whose parents were construction workers, were often neglected in the school. While we decided not to continue in the school, we remained committed to the children. This decision was made in the last two weeks, and it was a rather sudden development. We happily found the right room in the right place at the right time, and it felt like a rebirth of sorts.

Our hope is that, in this new setting, children will learn numeracy and literacy by engaging

Sita School

with their social and physical environments. We aim to meet both some of the parents' expectations and children's needs by providing an open space, and elements of structured support tailored to different children's needs.

Thejaswi: Now that you have shared this, especially about the last period, I am curious if we could delve into some details, particularly regarding the transition that occurred around 2010.

Jane: TheRtE Act, for instance, enforced certain regulations, including how children were grouped, and how a uniform curriculum should be followed and assessed. In addition, specific certification for teachers was required.

These changes all threatened to deeply alter certain aspects of the school as it had worked. It was not an unwillingness to be accountable. But we had a sense that the interests and needs of some children required a more open and flexible space.

As a group, we had to navigate this challenging time and decide which aspects of the school were key to supporting meaningful learning. Apart from the legal and bureaucratic demands, we also had to consider the community's changing aspirations. From around 2005, many of the children coming to the school faced various challenges in the face of rapid change and urbanization.

We realized, more than ever, that a school could not be an island, disconnected from the community it claimed to serve. There was a growing sense of a lack of alignment in what we could provide and what families were expecting from a school. One decision we made about five years before closing the school was to limit the intake of younger children, unless absolutely necessary, to allow for a gradual phase-out.

When the school finally closed, there were about 28 children. We ensured they transitioned to other schools. We supported them financially, especially those in difficult economic situations. However, three children with severe mental health issues could not easily adapt to the more formal structure of a conventional school.

We were fortunate that my son, Saumyananda (who had been part of the school in his childhood) decided to make a film about the school before its closure. It captured its essence without any voiceovers or interviews. Meanwhile, I worked on a book about creative writing, using methods we had developed to support children's independent writing.

It wasn't an easy process. We discussed it extensively as a core group. It felt akin to mourning a loss. However, we also understood that letting go was necessary for something new to emerge. Holding on to the past would have been paralyzing. Each of us experienced the journey differently. Ultimately, it is part of life's evolution.

Thejaswi: Absolutely. Letting go is an inevitable part of our lives. Isn't it? It's like the seasons. Change is constant and necessary. Jane, your insights resonate deeply with how we accept the natural cycles of life, yet struggle with the changes we initiate ourselves. It is intriguing how work has become such a central aspect of our lives, making decisions like the transition of Sita school over eight years a complex process. You weren't just responsible for the children at the school. You were also navigating personal and societal changes.

In earlier times, when Sita School began in Silvepura, the societal structure was different. Most villagers inherited professions from their forefathers. But as times changed, so did their occupations. This transformation sparked internal upheaval within the community. It mirrored the challenges you faced in responding to change. You have grappled with understanding which responses are viable and which are futile in the face of such shifts.

Reflecting on your words, I am left pondering the profound grip work holds over our identities and survival. It is not merely a means to exist but also a means to truly live. So, what does work mean to us? How do we balance immersion in our work while also maintaining a deeper understanding of why we do what we do? These are lifelong questions, ones that evolve alongside us.

Jane: Indeed, these questions are perpetual and ever-changing.

Thejaswi: Yes, Jane, and we will keep returning to these.

Jane: It is a continuous journey of discovery. Understanding our motivations for the work we do is crucial. Are they rooted in compassion, romanticism, sentimentality, or idealism? It is a challenging introspection.

Email: janehelensahi@gmail.com

Sita School

Beyond outcomes and impact

The need to relook at failure in the social sector

A conversation with P. S. Narayan

P. S. Narayan is the Global Head of Sustainability at Wipro Ltd., and the Managing Trustee at Wipro Foundation, the social initiatives arm of Wipro. He has been instrumental in the creation of Wipro's sustainability charter and has stewarded it since its inception in early 2008.

Samuhik Pahal: In the social sector, somehow failure now has become a completely negative thing. So, in this issue of Samuhik Pahal, we are trying to understand failure, what it means to people and how they experience it.

We plan to do this by making sense of the ways in which our whole self at work interfaces with failure. This includes the interfaces between the self and the world, and those between our personal journeys and the work we do. In doing so, we want to go beyond the 'learning from failure' frame.

Narayan P. S.: These are very important points, as they pertain to the meaning and definitions of success and failure in the social sector. One of the reasons why organizations like ours are flat is not just to do with the fact that we have fewer people compared to businesses. It is also about how we frame our work and its related milestones of achievement and success.

In many fields, such as the corporate sector and academia, success and failure are quite clearly defined. In the social sector, the nature of issues, and the ways in which these can be addressed, cannot always be defined in a cut and dried manner. Often, there is no easy way of defining progress, especially over the short-term.

The case of natural sciences is similar. In the sciences, failure (as seen with a conventional lens) is a part of the whole disciplinary architecture. You may spend years pursuing something and yet have nothing spectacular to show.

Some time back, the economist Daniel Kahneman, one of the founding fathers of behavioural economics, passed away. Although a Nobel laureate, he was quite unlike mainstream economists. He was fascinated with the idea of human frailty and vulnerability. In the many laudatory obituary pieces written about him, what came out interestingly was that he used to be the happiest when proven wrong. For him, you might be progressing in very real and authentic ways, and then unexpectedly be proven wrong, generating new and sometimes important learning in the process.

Now coming back to the social sector, let us take a few concrete examples. We work in primary healthcare. One of the areas we focus on is maternal health and childcare. So, let's say you are working in a slum in Delhi with women in the reproductive age. Young women from vulnerable communities cannot often access facilities and services that middleclass people take for granted. These include the right kind of nutrition during pregnancy, regular health checkups, medication, and institutional deliveries, etc.

If the IMR and MMR rates in the communities we work with are decreasing, if the number of institutional deliveries is increasing, if the proportion of newborns who are underweight is going down, then these are good yardsticks for measuring and assessing success in this space.

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However, let us say, you expand the circle longitudinally in time. For example, it is well known that the first five years of a child's life are critical. So, while a safe delivery is a great milestone where the child has normal weight and is otherwise healthy, the acid test is for the next five years during when a close watch needs to be kept on the child's nutrition levels, regular immunization, etc.

Please keep in mind that in these communities, the mothers cannot afford not to work. Do the infants and toddlers have access to good childcare facilities and creches? So, you need to focus on all of these, and more, for the next five years. And then comes early child education and then primary education for the next five years, and after that secondary education... So, it goes all the way. The point is that, depending on your definitions and framing, the boundaries of what you consider to be successful outcomes could keep changing.

A program may seem successful when seen from a proximate, short-term time horizon. You may say, "This is good; this is a great milestone." However, if we really want to make a difference to this community, not only must we increase the number and the proportion of safe deliveries, healthy babies, etc., but we must also contribute substantially to the longitudinal trajectory of the children's and the mothers' life journeys. The time horizons then widen to, say, at least a couple of decades.

If one must do justice to any of the SDG goals, we have to reasonably align with and meet the sub-objectives and targets. We are, therefore, talking about decades of sustained engagement. What this essentially means is that if you are a committed and genuine practitioner of social development, you are never going to be able to say to yourself, "I am now done." That is the nature of the space in that there can never be closure.

Seen from this point of view, the way you frame and look at success and failure in the social sector is very different. Our perspective should be longitudinally expansive. Outcomes

are typically interlinked with many other issues, often crossing domain boundaries. This is the reason why you often see social sector organizations start out on a specific domain like education or livelihoods. After a while, they realize that focusing on education alone is not going to produce results. There is a need to look at other things, like nutrition, water, etc. Many organizations at that point face the dilemma of whether to continue to focus on a specific domain or to expand the boundaries of what they have been doing.

Samuhik Pahal: So, what you are saying is this – "If we are doing something that may seem to be a success within the limited parameters set up for a project or a program, and we expand the frame and include other things that are important for the work in that space, then it doesn't look like a success anymore." Right? And then you need to put in more work. However, what does failure look like to you, in the specific contexts of work that you have been involved in?

Narayan P. S.: Conceptually, we cannot think of success and failure as binaries, or polar opposites in the sector. There are varying shades of success and failure that play out. Let us take a very commonplace example from ecology - of planting trees, which is a very popular activity. There are so many individuals, communities and NGOs doing this. A bunch of people go, prepare the ground/soil, plant saplings, water them, and come out with the feeling of fulfilment and a sense that you have done something very useful and constructive. It also has clear metrics associated with it, in terms of so many saplings planted, so many people involved, etc.

Anecdotally though, we know that the survival rates of tree plantations is very low. So, as an activity, tree planting in the first one month or maybe the first six months of the program, can perhaps be classified as a success. However, the same activity, after three or five years, may be classified as a failure.

Then, there are other cases in point. The outcome of some intervention or public policy measure may be prima facie (and by all means) good and beneficial. However, as things start unravelling in time, the cascading impacts may not turn out to be truly sustainable or equitable, and may end up being something completely unexpected.

The classic case is that of the agricultural stubble burning that happens in Punjab and Haryana in winter and its contributions to the worsening of air quality in Delhi. The genesis of the problem goes back to the otherwise well-intentioned Punjab Preservation of Subsoil Water Act, 2009. This law seeks to preserve groundwater by prohibiting the summer kharif crop before the monsoon lands in India. Its measures mandate the sowing of the kharif crop in mid-June, so that the crops are primarily watered by the monsoon rains. In the process, the harvesting cycle has been pushed out by a few weeks, compared to the earlier practices.

This has generated cascading downstream effects. One of these is the shortening of the time window between the harvesting of the monsoonal kharif crop and the sowing of the winter rabi crop. This, in turn, does not allow sufficient time for clearing the fields of crop stubble, etc. Because of this, farmers have just started burning the stubble. This is the easiest thing for them to do. The extensive stubble burning, all at once, abetted by westerly winds, contribute to Delhi's plummeting air quality in November and December.

How would you classify this entire scenario then? As a success or a failure? Let us hypothesize that some NGOs would have supported water conservation efforts and done advocacy work for the related policy architecture to come into being, that eventually led to stubble burning. How would they assess the impact of their interventions? The answer would be very ambivalent, as it's a mixed story. There are many other examples of such unintended consequences.

Samuhik Pahal: Two things stand out from this. The first is about the unintended effects of our actions in the social sector. The second is something that you have highlighted earlier - the longitudinal nature of the work involved. This raises the question of the timeframe within which we measure impact and outcomes. It perhaps points to a more fundamental question. To be able to discuss impact and outcomes meaningfully, we need to have a shared understanding about what are the desirable outcomes in the sector. Does this shared understanding exist? What are your views on this?

Narayan P. S.: People in the social sector do understand the complexities involved in this issue. That is the reason why probably some have settled for more tactical, near-term metrices that are really outputs, or at best, outcomes.

For example, these may be about the number of schools or children an organization works with, or the number of teachers and primary healthcare paramedics being trained. One could of course argue that these are useful proxies for the actual impact being created. At a practical level, they help you avoid philosophical debates and complex arguments.

It is only if you want to continue peeling the next layer of the onion, that you come face to face with the larger systemic issues and the philosophical arguments about what constitutes success in a social project.

Samuhik Pahal: In the broader framework within which the social sector functions in India, that of a constitutional democracy (and the transformational agenda that the Constitution of India has set for Indian society) how would you see and locate our discussion on failure and success?

Narayan P. S.: The nature of this domain, and the kind of issues involved, are such that it is difficult, if not downright impossible, to quantify the work that you are doing beyond a certain point. However, there is also a certain value in communicating progress about the work that one is doing in concrete terms. The stakeholders involved may be varied. And you may need to communicate to your own company's employees and leadership... or perhaps to your customers and investors.

In such a scenario, it may make more sense to keep it simple. Instead of talking about long-term impact (and success and failure), there may be value in saying that, "I am working with my partners, reaching out to X million children spread across Y states in India..." The right thing to do however, from the angle of transparency and honesty, is to qualify this by saying that despite the scale of the work, there are many caveats, assumptions and uncertainties.

The classic example in this regard is perhaps climate change. Companies like us, and at a larger scale even countries, now have climate change targets, net zero targets, with underlying action plans. It is quite easy for us to define milestones of progress in climate change, because these things are reasonably easy to measure.

What was your carbon footprint 10 years back? What is it today? Where do you want to go? Ten years from now, how are you going to achieve it? These are questions companies today are quite adept at answering. The confluence of technology, policies and available funding has ensured that some of the solutions are quite easy to implement today. For example, renewable energy currently is cheaper than regular electricity. It is a no brainer, therefore, for a company to invest in renewable energy, and to concomitantly bring down its carbon footprint.

However, what is the actual effect of many companies like us progressing toward, and eventually achieving, net zero carbon emissions? It may not add up to what is required from the point of view of avoiding climate disaster. This is because India's

electricity system is still predominantly (60 to 70 percent) based on coal-powered thermal stations. As we try to grow and develop our economy, we need significantly more energy and electricity. The fact of the matter is that India is not going to be able to do this by shutting down any of the existing coal power stations for at least the next two decades.

So, as a company, our investing in renewable energy, and becoming 100% renewable by 2030 (which is our target, and many companies are doing something similar), is a worthwhile goal. What it will eventually add up to though is that it may help us avoid or prevent future capacity additions of coal power at an aggregate level. It could therefore prevent the problem from worsening.

But for the next several years, renewable energy is not going to help us bring down the level of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. And, therefore, it is not going to help us solve the climate change problem within the next five to seven years, which is what is needed in order to contain the severity of the challenge.

I am going to close this example with what is happening at the global and country levels since 1992. That was the year when the "Earth Summit" (formally called "The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development" - UNCED) was held in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. Is it that nothing has happened, and countries are not doing anything since then?

The answers are clear. Many countries have joined this journey and have committed significant monetary, people and institutional resources. There's a lot of good work that has happened over the years... with a lot of action happening on the ground. Yet, after 32 years, we are saying that we are nowhere near solving the problem. In fact, things are only getting worse. And, that climate catastrophe is just around the corner....and so on.

Complex issues, such as climate change or matters related to social development, are embedded in systems where the boundaries between the known and the unknown keep shifting. What we knew about climate change 30 years back was much less compared to what we know today. As we know more and more, we discover that we know less and less. That is the reason why despite making so much progress on the one hand, we don't seem to be making much headway.

So, it is important for a company like us to be honest about this larger picture and qualify

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the narratives of our achievements and successes from that perspective. It is a little difficult for corporations to do that, as in the regular business world success and failure are much more 'black and white' and short-term. They are easier to define, and relate, for example, to the number of new customers acquired, gains in market share, and meeting revenue targets, etc. There are no debates about these metrices or goals. When you look at social issues though, things become fuzzier.

A company like ours takes prides in its values. It has the basic responsibility of communicating honestly. And that translates to communicating both the good and the bad. In the larger narrative, the short-term, the medium-term, and the long-term time horizons are all interconnected. Against such expanded scales of time, space and demographics, there is only so much a company can do. It might still seem like a lot to others and impressive in its own right. However, it is best to qualify this honestly.

Samuhik Pahal: And it is OK to fail?

Narayan P. S.: Semantics make a big difference. For example, it is not correct for any organization to say that it is making the world more sustainable by doing a bunch of things. The honest thing to say is that it is taking a few steps that will make the world a little less unsustainable. There is a big difference there - between moving from minus five to minus four where you progress by a measure of +1. When moving from +4 to +5, you also progress by a measure of +1. The absolute values are the same. But they mean very different things.

Samuhik Pahal: It has been quite an interesting conversation. In some sense, it is also connected to an earlier conversation that we had on impact assessment.

Narayan P. S.: Yes. It seems to be coincidental. What is clearly emerging is that the way you look at impact is closely linked to the way you look at success and failure in the social sector. And that in turn is closely linked to how you see yourself individually, and to what success and failure mean for you.

Other aspects of failure in the social sector relate to governance and the ways in which we run things. Not all CSR entities are the same. These often seem to be doing similar kinds of work. However, one factor that differentiates one from the other, is the means deployed to achieve the ends, the processes used, and the underlying values and principles.

I would qualify success and failure in the social sector from this perspective of the means. The means you employ includes your sources of funding, your governance systems, the processes you use for due diligence, etc. These things are critical, because when it comes to outcomes and impact, an organization's value added may just be a blip.

Beyond the question of making big, visible progress, it's important to recognize that just by chipping away at issues little by little by little, we are doing something of great value. Ultimately, it is your value system and perspective, which must constitute the anchor point to calibrate yourself.

On August 15, 1947, when the entire country was celebrating our independence, Mahatma Gandhi was in Kolkata, trying to heal the wounds of the violent run-up to the partition of India. He was in distress, as he thought he had failed to prevent the country's partition.

Other leaders, though perhaps equally anguished, let the glory of newly found independence override whatever remorse they might have had. For the majority, it was a long-awaited milestone, a stellar achievement.

So, while most saw successful fruition of a long-drawn struggle, Gandhi saw darkness all around. Therefore, it really boils down to these subtle differences and nuances in how you see things.

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