

The Science and Art of Learning

Critique of the MP Government's Response

○ **Ramakant Agnihotri**

In MANUSHI Issue No.133, we published the article 'A Black Day in Education' by Dr. Ramakant Agnihotri expressing concern and disquiet at the axing of Eklavya's Science Teaching Programme (HSTP) by the Madhya Pradesh Government. In the same issue we also published the Government's version, as presented by Amita Sharma, Secretary, Primary Education, Government of M.P (GoMP) giving reasons for discontinuing support to Eklavya after a 30-year-old collaboration. We are now publishing the three reactions to Amita Sharma's response along with a fresh rejoinder by her on the issue.

For reasons best known to it, the Government of Madhya Pradesh (GoMP) refuses to engage with the issues I raised in my article (MANUSHI 133: 7-14). The quality of education that reaches the underprivileged is becoming increasingly substandard. Why should the GoMP, which has for a long time, actively supported innovative and progressive efforts, particularly meant for poor children, suddenly turn against Eklavya's Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme, which was making all possible efforts to teach science as it should be taught? The evidence I cited in favour of HSTP was overwhelming. What were the academic grounds on which the programme was closed down?

In fact, the Government did not even follow its own procedural norms. HSTP and a variety of other programmes (e.g. Prashika, SSTP, Bal Melas, toy workshop, etc.), through publications (e.g. *Chakmak*, *Sandarbh*, *Srote*, *Hoshangabad Vigyan* and a variety of translations and books from time to time) and institutions such as Swaliram and Eklavya, created an unprecedented platform for serious academic discourse on the theory and practice of pedagogy. Closing

down HSTP and some other programmes amounts to choking (rather effective) voices of innovation, rationality and dissent. Is it desirable to leave decisions regarding curriculum, textbooks, methods and classroom transaction solely to the members of the District Planning Council?

What we are fighting for is space for innovation and sustained renewal of pedagogical theory and practice; a space where a set of knowledgeable people, in collaboration with children, teachers, parents, and academics can consistently reflect over the science

and art of learning and teaching. In a variety of subtle ways, the ideas and practices born out of innovations spread far beyond the school and areas where HSTP was operative.

Was it All Negative ?

In an article running into eight printed pages, the GoMP does not have a single positive thing to say about HSTP or Eklavya.

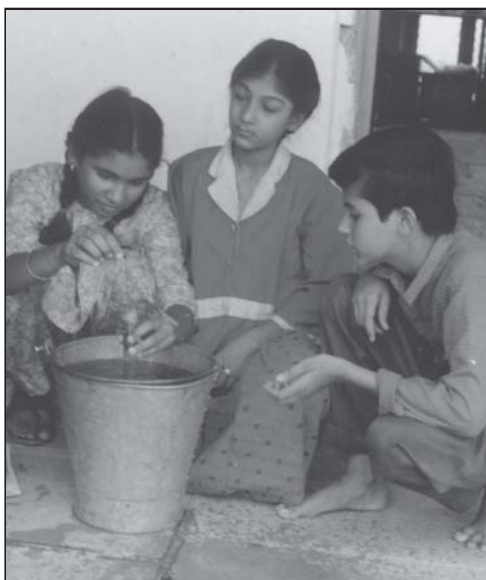
→ It claims that Eklavya has remained 'surprisingly naïve about how our educational system functions' (p.16).

→ Over the years, HSTP has not progressed nor grown in stature (p.16).

→ Eklavya has not critically reviewed its work with a sense of social accountability (p.17).

→ It did not appreciate that the school and its curriculum should be conceptualised as a whole, rather than making interventions only at the middle school level—and that too only in science and social science. For example, 'poor language skills affect almost all learning, yet language has been ignored' (p.18).

→ This 'educationally blinkered experiment... failed to check the proliferation of *kunjis* (guide books) to HSTP (p.19).



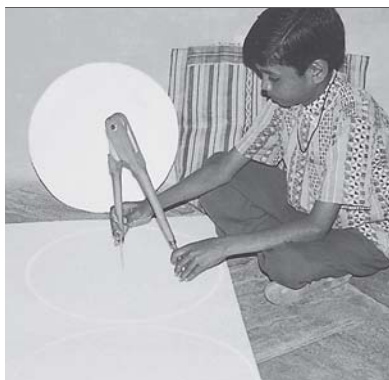
→ It has shown no evidence of any responsibility to its children, community or local democratic bodies (p.20) and has failed to establish its effectiveness in the eyes of the consumer, depending largely on bureaucratic fiat and protection from political changes to survive (p.20).

What surprises one most is that against this assessment, the GoMP should still desire to associate Eklavya with its programmes of educational change! How can an NGO with such a dismal track record participate in the larger process of educational reform and help improving existing academic inputs (p.22)? In my article I provided solid evidence for some of the landmark contributions made by Eklavya in the field of education. No part of this assessment addresses any of those issues.

Expanding Horizons

The Eklavya group consisted largely of scientists and not of child psychologists and linguists; therefore, it developed the middle school HSTP, whereby children were taught practical science. A few years into the programme, the group realised that unless it focused on primary education and strengthened the reading, writing and numerical abilities of children, HSTP may not work as effectively as Eklavya would like it to. The group immediately got in touch with linguists and psychologists. That is how, with the help of a large number of scholars and institutions including GoMP, Prashika was born, to be followed soon by SSTP. I wonder what more rational and stronger linkages an NGO with such limited resources and manpower could build? Soon the group would have moved to the higher classes, now that the primary and the middle classes were improved.

So far as building a relationship with the community is concerned, it is true that there was always some



opposition to HSTP. But this came from a very small number of people and was motivated by a variety of reasons including lack of understanding of the innovation; the extra work it involved for children, teachers and trainers; and stock responses such as ‘why us’ or some petty political manipulation. In any case, whenever there was any opposition, members of the Eklavya team met the local people and explained to them the significance of the way they were trying to do things.

Most of these differences were settled amicably. After all, curricular issues cannot be settled by the raising of hands. So far as the achievement levels of HSTP children were concerned, I quoted several studies in my article, showing that they were better at logical thinking and conceptual clarity. A lot more work still needs to be done on evaluating issues. In fact, it would be legitimate to ask what efforts the State has made to assess the achievements of the programme and to assimilate its positive aspects, if any, into its system? As far as the proliferation of *kunjis* is concerned, I am really not sure what to say. I think it is a very complex issue. What is clear is that nobody can do the HSTP kind of science with the help of a *kunji*.

Mistaken Assumptions

In general, the perspective on education reflected in GoMP’s response is based on a set of

incomplete and mistaken assumptions about children, society, and the role of education in human life. Though it may look rather crude and naïve, these assumptions may be summarised as follows:

- Children must be educated (read ‘made literate’) because this is our constitutional and civil requirement.
- We know what that education should consist of; we also know the best ways in which the literacy and numeracy we call education can be transmitted; and we also know how children learn.
- It is important to ensure uniformity across the State (why not the country or the world?) by say using the same textbook or the same teacher training module across the whole State.
- A teacher is essentially a worker. What we need to do is simply to equip her with a set of tasks that she would perform in a regimented way, assuring changes in learner behaviour. There is no need to professionalise elementary education – after all, any literate person can teach children counting and alphabets.
- There obviously can be few places for innovations in such a system. If any, they must be introduced and must be accountable to the people and the State—that is, prove their potential for mainstreaming. Such ‘banking’ concepts of education inevitably lead to multi-grade classrooms and ‘joyful learning’.

The ways in which such approaches can trivialise the philosophical, psychological and pedagogical aspects of education, and in the process making a mockery of the whole concept of ‘quality education’, has recently been shown by Dhankar (2002).

It is indeed true that one important role of education is transmission of a society’s language,