

## It's true, the state can run excellent schools

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In 1973, I joined Central School Bhopal in Class I. On the second day, my class teacher called me to the front of the classroom and asked me to open my palm; then she proceeded to hit me with a scale. The details are vivid in my mind. After the incident, I refused to go back to school. So, the next day, my father decided to drive me to school. Patiently, he sat with me in the car waiting for me to agree to go inside. Stubborn as I was then (and now), I just sat in the car with him. After a long while, when my father realized that my resolve was unyielding, he took me home. The next day, the same saga ensued.

But on the third day of this silent battle, Mrs. Deshpande, the school's vice-principal, came out with a red rose in her hand. I have no recollection what she said to me. But I vividly remember walking into the school, one hand clutching hers, and the other holding the rose. She led me to a different section of Class I. Tara madam was the class teacher. She welcomed me with the same affection, which remained for the next 3 years as she remained my class teacher.

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I can't help but wonder how things could have gone differently if Mrs. Deshpande and Tara madam had not been there. How would my schooling have turned out? It is likely that I would have gone to school

sooner or later, but I probably would have gone back to the same section whose class teacher hit me. What that would have meant subsequently is hard to say—I can only speculate.

Two weeks ago, on a rainy Sunday evening, I met seven of my friends from school. Five of them from 1973. Almost 50 years have passed since we joined school, but till that evening, I had no idea that there were two others in the small group of seven in whose school life Mrs. Deshpande had played a similar role.

Central Schools or Kendriya Vidyalayas (KVs) were set up in 1963 to ensure that the children of Union government employees, such as the armed forces, public sector units, Indian Administrative Service and police officers, among others, had good schools available to them even if their parents were transferred across the country. Today there are 1,252 KVs with over 1.4 million students. Even now, they are regarded, and rightly so, as good schools, despite the swankier private schools that have sprung up. They have maintained high quality standards and delivered on their mandate across hundreds of cities and towns.

I spent 9 years in KV Bhopal. Classes IV, V and IX, I was in other cities. My memories of the school are exactly the same as those of my friends. Mrs. Deshpande and Tara madam were perhaps the kindest of all teachers, but the school had a lot of good teachers. In our memory, only two or three were cruel or bad teachers. One of them would have surely been put behind bars if the current regulations on corporal punishment had existed then. But most of them were kind, capable and engaged.

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The second abiding memory of the school is that it was a super busy place. There was always more that was happening outside the classrooms than one could imagine. Theatre, debate, sports, picnics and a lot more. At least in our memories, it seems like a blur of activities. Our school had maximized all dimensions and possibilities of learning, carefully coordinating them. It was the kind of vibrant school that we aspire for. Without doubt, the driving force of that culture was Rajguru sir, the principal of the school for over a decade.

We didn't think of it like that then, but the richness of diversity is seared in our hearts and minds, perhaps the most precious experience. Children of IAS and IPS officers were in my class, as was the son of the chief minister, as were the children of what in government service parlance are called Class IV employees. We were rarely conscious of any difference. That kind of mix of children across class divides is unimaginable today. I suspect that unless placed in remote locations, high officials tend to send their children to fancy private schools now, not to KVs. As I look back over these 50 years, I have no doubt that our respective social capital arising from our family background has played a huge role in our life trajectories. But without doubt, the school that provided equal education to all opened a wider range of possibilities, and even more certainly made us better people than what we perhaps would have been otherwise.

KVs are public schools. They stand as clear examples of how public schools can be run well—we have six decades of evidence. These are not the only good public schools but certainly the most visible ones.

It would be misleading to neglect pointing out that per student expenditure in a KV is two to three times that in an average state-run public school. For sure, that difference accounts for a significant part of how KVs have maintained quality. And this expenditure does not factor in the significantly higher capital expenditure that results in better facilities, nor the effect of scale, since KVs on an average are 8-10 times larger the average state school. Considering all this, the per student expenditure is effectively 4 to 5 times. There is no way of side-stepping the matter of increasing public expenditure for education.

There are Mrs. Deshpandes and Tara madams out there among all public-school teachers across the country, because the nature of a teachers' role fosters compassion. If we back them with the same investment as the country has made in KVs, our public schools will be transformed.

*Anurag Behar is CEO of Azim Premji Foundation.*

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