

# Schools and sand dunes

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It was the first time I walked on sand dunes. The winter evening sun converted the sand to gold. He was wearing a craggy closed-neck coat which had thick black and white vertical stripes in the weave. We had walked half a kilometre (km) into the dunes. He pointed in one direction, “two kilometres that way there is a school”, then another direction for another school 3km away. “The four of us are responsible for 600 schools,” he said. Some schools are in places where they can take their bikes, for others they leave the bike on the road and walk, such as the two he pointed out across the dunes.

There is no winter evening sun through the year. There is the heat and the sand storms. Through this they reach the schools, it is their job. This is the education block resource team of Chautan in Barmer district of Rajasthan. They are there to support the schools of the block. His face shows the effect of trying to connect 600 schools through the sand and heat. It also shows how alone each of these schools is, and how isolated the teachers may feel.

A teacher from one school said, “There is God, and then there is me, that’s it.” He was not being dramatic; his reality is that he has to fend for himself completely. Clean and maintain the school, handle 30-40 students in every way, deal with the community, manage the mid-day meals, fill up reports, manage vaccination camps, respond to the officers and the list is much longer. Two other teachers were not fatalistic. They said: “We can live here crying, or we can live here laughing.” They are all on their own.

Many of them live in the schools, since there is no place to rent in the village and it is not possible to walk a few kilometres every day in that terrain from elsewhere. In Jaipur, they call this region kalapaani for Barmer is a pretty hard place to be in. Every aspect of the district emphasizes the isolation of teachers, although their reality is not different elsewhere.

Fifty kilometres outside Bangalore, just off National Highway 4, I walked into a school. No one had visited them in a year. The teacher had been to the block office for supplies; he had virtually no real connection with the system.

There are demands on the teachers and the block education authorities to file administrative reports very often. However, interactions between different parts of the system are rare let alone a genuine connection on their real work—education. This is the story across India.

The task of organizing good education for even a single child is perhaps one of the most challenging things that a person can face. The reality of being a teacher and doing this for 30-40 students makes this exponentially harder. This role becomes even more complex in India, given our diversity and socio-economic characteristics.

The design of our schooling system with schools within a kilometre of each habitation has solved the problem of access, but has added further complexity. It forces teachers to handle children across age groups together. It has also contributed to the isolation of teachers and other education functionaries. The Barmer example makes this stark: teachers in remote sand dunes, on their own.

But, let this not suggest that the issue of isolation exists only in the so-called hard places. This is the reality everywhere for our teachers even in the heart of our cities too.

This is because physical disconnectedness is only a part of the problem. The core issue is that our large, bureaucratized, education system does not recognize the importance of intellectual and social connectedness of a teacher for her ability to perform her role. This arises partly from the mechanizing, deindividualizing tendencies that are common to most large organizational systems. Unlike industries, which thrive on scale, schools need to be smaller networks, connected to communities with substantial autonomy for teachers and school leaders.

Even more the problem arises from the doubtful assumptions about a teacher's role, which ignore its complex and creative nature. Complex, creative professions such as film-making or being a scientist thrive on intellectual and social connectedness; we think of this as natural. Such connectedness is equally crucial for teachers. It is just that we don't think of the teachers' role as being similarly demanding and challenging, when in reality this is very much so.

I have seen repeatedly that it doesn't take much to enable this connectedness. It is often about someone playing a facilitating role to bring together a group of teachers. It does require persistence and thoughtfulness. The block (and cluster) level resources are ideally placed to do this, but they are thinly spread, and themselves in need of some help to build their capacity to play this kind of a role.

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