

Mid-day meal tragedy: There's hope for Bihar

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In the years 1995-2000, I used to visit Bihar three-four times a year. I was then involved in the financing of hospitals and other healthcare facilities. I had made enough mistakes by then, and learnt that the only way to figure out the real risks of lending to a particular hospital or doctor was to do your own due diligence on the ground. Then, Bihar was widely regarded as having failed in every way. Its reputation for lawlessness did make the idea of financing there seem foolish. In pursuit of growth, we were adventurous. As our portfolio in Bihar built up, we saw that it was no worse than most other parts of the country. So we kept going on.

In those many weeks spent on the ground in Bihar, I never faced a situation of physical intimidation or threat. But I saw every day the fear and caution with which the doctors lived. It was usual to hear of cars being forcibly taken away, of demands being made for cash, and of kidnapping for ransom. The newspapers carried worse news. There was chaos on the few roads that existed, and grime everywhere. It did seem like we were digging for gold in our own wild east.

The people we dealt with did not conform to this otherwise complete wild east scenario. They were as competent, as professional and as knowledgeable as in one of the more developed parts of the country, say Chennai. This is what kept us going and the portfolio in reasonable shape.

It was in 2011 that I went back to Bihar. It was a different place from what I had known. There was no fear in the air; my old doctor friends validated this. The other superficial symbols of the wild east had also vanished. My work was now with school education.

We work with state school systems. It requires close collaboration with multiple levels of the state government, from being on the ground with teachers to working with the state education leadership. We have worked in many states in the past years, and our experience has on the whole been positive. Still, there have been marked differences between states, as also over time within the same state. These differences have largely been a result of the varying levels of competence, commitment and vision of the people in positions of education leadership. This is not just one or two people at the very top, but perhaps 200-300 people in each state who staff crucial positions.

What we encountered in Bihar, we have rarely experienced. Most people whom we met in their education leadership were highly capable and committed. This was certainly not by chance; the team has probably been carefully constructed. This team has an educational

vision—which is resonant with the education ideals that we aspire for. Their ideas and plans are rooted in a pragmatic assessment of what will actually work on the ground. There is positive energy seeping through the Bihar education system. There is alignment of goals at different levels, the concrete plans are backed by resources and there is a focus on improving institutional structures.

It is clear that in almost every way the Bihar school education system is currently facing the same challenges as elsewhere in the country and that there is a long, long way to go. But it is also clear that there is a purposeful beginning of improvements, and this has filled many with hope.

Last week 23 children died after eating a mid-day meal in a school in Dharmasati Gandaman, in Chhapra district of Bihar. They were buried near the school. It's a tragedy from which recovery is not possible, certainly for the families of those children, and the village. Ongoing investigation may tell us what really happened, as of now there seem to be informed and uninformed guesses. If there is any sort of redemption for this country, it's in making sure that the delivery of mid-day meals becomes completely safe, so that something like this never happens again.

It's a complex exercise. It involves the feeding of 120 million children across 1.2 million schools in every nook and corner of the country, every day. Given India's poor record of execution on everything, this behemoth system is obviously rife with risk. Invoking collective responsibility is usually an excuse from accountability, but in this case the invocation by the Union minister for human resource development is accurate. Only real collective responsibility, from the community to the policymakers, along with adequate resources and focus can improve this system and make it safe.

The tragedy has cast a grip of sadness and apprehension. This grip must not derail the mid-day-meal programme itself. Its importance is felt every day in millions of homes; it's perhaps the only full meal for their children. This tragedy must also not de-energize or disrupt the education team in Bihar. Else, we will have another promising start for improvement in education petering out. I hope that this doesn't happen, because rarely are the stars so aligned for genuine change.

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