

# Good people, hard places

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Hoshangabad is 60km south of Bhopal. Many paths in Indian education lead there, because that is where they started. You may know of the city only as a train station on the Delhi-Chennai line.

The city now has a population of 150,000 and it's a district headquarters. Glimpses of the present are unmistakable in the city, even though it seems to be still in the 1980s. It's not hard to imagine what it might have been really like in the 1970s.

In the 70s, the city's sole claim to fame rested on the superhit Naya Daur having been shot 10km away in Budni. That is when the quiet revolution in education started there. The fires were lit with the Friend's Rural Centre and Kishore Bharati, which evolved into the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme (HSTP).

Good thinking and good work in education had happened before HSTP in India, of that there is no doubt, and it continued to happen. But there had been nothing like HSTP. There never had been an attempt in India to improve education in government schools, where improvement meant scientific temper and learning to think, with good education as a path to social justice, at the scale and in the reality of real India. HSTP attempted to do this across the district of Hoshangabad. It was inspiring and inspired.

HSTP itself changed and evolved, spawning efforts on a larger scale, and then eventually shut down. Over the past three decades, HSTP has continued to inspire and influence education in India: through its ideas, its people and its methods. You can see the spirit of HSTP in the National Curricular Framework 2005, in the excellent NCERT textbooks, in the various kinds of activity based learning methods in many states, in the hundreds of people and organizations that carry its fire. But most of all you can see it in the now legitimate mainstream idea that education is about learning to think and about social justice.

This column is not about HSTP, which will need a few reams.

It's about the starting point of HSTP. The starting point of HSTP was the decision of people like [Anil Sadgopal](#) to go and live in Hoshangabad. Actually he lived in Bankhedi, which was a village 90 km from Hoshangabad. He was a Caltech (California Institute of Technology) educated scientist at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, when he decided to make the move.

The revolution of HSTP was fired by similar decisions by many: Kamal, Sadhna, Hardy, Vinod, Anjali, Anwar, Syag and many more. They were (and are) all good people. All of them were from mostly large cities. While for all of them the choice to serve a social cause was the fundamental point, HSTP would not have happened had they not willingly moved to Hoshangabad. No amount of their commitment and capability would have fired the revolution that happened, if they had chosen to live in Delhi.

Over time, I have come around to the view that to make change happen where it is needed most, the central question is: how will good people move to those places? I sense that this is true for all social issues, while I have experienced it in education.

“Those places” is most of India. The country’s 680-odd districts have over 6,000 blocks. Your guess is as good as mine as to how many of those places people want to move to, or to continue to stay in, if they have ambition and capability. In fact, the greater the need in a district, more “difficult” will it be.

The reality that we can’t escape is: to make change happen in education, we need strong teams in each of the districts, with presence in each of the blocks. Without that proximity, the deep, sustained and continuous academic support that schools and teachers require is impossible. So that we don’t go on a tangent: technology can help, but can’t replace this on-the-ground effort and you can’t “send people for training”—no amount of short-term training away from their context can help.

Each of our districts has between 800 to 4,000 schools; put together any two-three districts and they are like Finland. One can imagine the depth of expertise required locally to make any real change happen. The government has created structures with this reality in mind. There are block-level academic support people and each district has a District Institute of Education and Training. However, either these positions are staffed with people who do not have the required expertise or positions are vacant.

Do “good people” need to only move from outside? In a sense—no; over the long term the capacity of people who live in all places can be developed. But to make that happen, we still need people there—sort of pioneering groups.

My experience suggests it’s possible, it’s happening. Often it only needs one man or woman to say, “I will move”. Then people follow. Sounds romantic? But it does happen. Anil has shown that, so have many others, including people that I work with every day in Yadgir, Barmer, Uttarkashi, Dhmatari and so on.

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