

A weak support system

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Mujhe administrative me khinch lijiye, I heard this often as a kid. “Pull me in to the administrative side.” The translation loses the sense of urgency that it conveys in Hindi.

My large extended family and their friends were (almost) all in government service. A fair number of them were in education—in some academic role or the other, as teachers in schools and professors in colleges. I heard that phrase from many of them as a plea to people who were “high up” in administration.

The desire to abandon academics was driven by the attraction of “administrative” power and the reality where academicians were under the thumb of even the lowest member of the administrative hierarchy. That was 30 years ago.

It was a biting cold afternoon in January, in a small town in Kumaon. We had a meeting with the staff of the Block Resource Centre (BRC), the nodal academic support institution for government schools in the block. It was the kind of a meeting that you can expect in any BRC. There was discussion on apprehensions about the Right to Education (RTE) and something about inadequate staffing. Quite a bit of it was about how they have no time for their actual roles as senior officials keep pulling them into all kinds of information gathering and dissemination activities. These range from gathering information about mid-day meals, distributing government orders and collecting data on admissions.

As we were leaving, it was even colder. On a bend in the climb uphill, one of them said to us, to no one in particular, mujhe administrative me le lijiye.

Things haven’t changed much in all these years. He knew that we did not hold government positions, but thought that people from Bangalore and Dehradun will have some influence in the right places. Hence his plea.

Most educational districts have three-eight blocks, which are administrative units. BRCs are academic support institutions for schools in that block. Blocks usually have 100-200 schools, which are divided in to “clusters” of 10-20 schools. Each cluster has a Cluster Resource Centre—to provide more immediate, direct academic support to schools.

Academic support means a host of things: professional development of teachers, material development, improvement in assessment, in-school support on difficult issues, among others— basically, all kinds of academic stuff to improve education in the school.

This is a comprehensive structure, which has been envisioned and invested into by the government. The CRC and BRC support ladder in the district is capped by the District Institute of Education and Training (DIET). The country has created this structure of academic support for schools in the past 20 years. There are over 500 DIETs, a few thousand BRCs and many more thousand's of CRCs. Together they account for 30,000-50,000 people.

This large-scale and multi-level system is designed for coverage, proximity and depth. It demonstrates that we are willing to invest for improving education. The problem is that this well designed system doesn't work well—partly because it has the same maladies that are found in other parts of our large bureaucracy. There are some specific reasons as well.

First, as narrated by BRC staff in the town in Kumaon, education administration tends to use these academic people freely for menial and mundane administrative purposes. The system pays no heed to the academic purposes for which the structure has been devised. Second, the roles demand that they should be staffed by academically sound (and interested) individuals. In reality, usually the average teacher is posted in CRC/BRC. For such a person, it is nearly impossible to play the role of the academic expert for similarly capable teachers. Third, these institutions are not academically empowered. Usually they act as messengers even on academic issues, with no expectation of applying their own mind. It is not possible to make effective academic interventions in that culture.

While it may take a lot to make this large system vibrant, it is not so difficult to make it reasonably effective. The basic tasks are quite obvious. For starters, recruiting capable individuals from within schools and investing in developing their academic capacity should be a priority. Second, a culture that recognizes the value of academic work and lets them get on with it needs to be fostered. Third, within the framework of the curriculum, these institutions need to set their own goals and plans that are responsive to local conditions. They should not be treated as minions within the administrative hierarchy. Finally, India needs a separate "academic cadre" to ensure that only those who are interested in such roles are taken join it. Those interested in administrative roles should have no part in it. A fundamental overhaul of the pre-service education (for example, at the level of training imparted in the bachelor of education programme, among others,) system is perhaps the most urgent need in Indian education today. This will also help the academic support structure to become more effective.

In a country of our size and diversity, we will always need a system of academic support of schools. We are committed to it and have created it. We have to make it work.

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