



Brahmarakutlu Higher Primary school was a below average school on all counts. The education department had already termed it a 'low achieving' school. The parents of the villages Kallige and Thumbbe were aware of this situation since they had to face the insult of the high school teachers when they dared to admit their children in the nearby high schools. Usually it would be mild like "we are full, we cannot take more people" or as harsh as "we do not admit the children of Brahmarakutlu school" or "we do not guarantee the passing of children from Brahmarakutlu school". This was the situation in 1983 when I was asked to become a member of the school betterment committee. I took this role very seriously and entered the committee with a lot of enthusiasm. Looking back at those initial days I feel that unlike some of the famous betterment committees of our region, our committee was very mild. The teachers would convene the meeting and ask for some help and our President - a very powerful personality, would either say 'yes' or 'no' and that was the end of it. All of us were mere members nodding to whatever the President or Head teacher said.

In 1998 my daughter joined the same school in our village. This was the time when the School Development and Monitoring Committee (SDMC) was introduced and the parent body got a lot of power. The SDMC members were elected from among the parents of the children attending the school. Now, the powerless were reluctant to get in to these posts. I found that even the teachers were not appreciative of this phenomena. It was in this position that both of us (Vani, my

wife, and I) started working with our own people. We started talking about this issue and why they have to take a lead. We also convinced them that this is the government order and hence their right. We focused on a few village leaders and youth to convince the community that it is possible to work in the SDMC and that does not require them to spend a lot of money. Many got convinced and ordinary parents were elected to the SDMC. This made a marked difference. It clearly checked the phenomenon of the powerful getting more power and authority.

My friends were bitter that I was depriving my children of quality education by getting them enrolled in Government school. Now this did disturb me. Both of us (Vani & I) discussed this situation. We came to a conclusion that the differentiator between a good and bad school is the exposure the children receive. We could see that in well run private schools the children got a lot of exposure. This built their confidence and knowledge. Hence, our emphasis was on providing the exposure to the children. We planned theatre workshops, leadership camps, creativity workshops and exposure visits. The workshops that were started then continue even today with the help of the children of the initial batches. The exposure visits started with a visit to a nearby brick kiln developed further to interesting places of historic importance. What began as a small group, soon evolved into an all-class trip where all the children along with their parents participated thus helping the teachers.

The next stage was a very important stage in the History of our SDMC. We started organizing programs for the people/community through the SDMC. The first program was one on rain water harvesting. An expert in this area Sri Padre delivered a small lecture and demonstration. This evoked a lot of interest and we had a series of activities that followed. It started with a few of us adopting it in our house and in our land. By year three we had many families reaping rich harvest in this area. Eventually Vani was the president of the SDMC and we continued the involvement in the school very rigorously. We had a lot of people coming and speaking on child development, effective parenting,

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teaching learning process and on communicating within the family. These decisions led to the local youth groups joining hands in conducting programs, camps, workshops in these areas. Two buildings came up. The Anganvadi which was in the village with inadequate amenities was brought into the school campus with full fledged infrastructure. The school did very well in sports and participated in cultural activities at the block level. The school brought out a magazine where children wrote on different topics. Slowly the school became the epicenter of activities in the village. Vani had to leave since our children finished their schooling and had to come out of the village for high school education.

Our children joined the Centre for Learning in Bengaluru. Here we had a very well evolved parent teacher group meeting every month without fail that discussed various topics not only restricted to education but also on larger life questions. These discussions were very rich and challenging. We were most of the time quiet in these meetings and did reflect a lot after these meetings. Unlike my village parents here the parents are very resourceful; they not only helped the school at various levels but also could comment on the academics and pedagogy of the school. One experience in CFL was my involvement in the national level seminar conducted a few years ago. In this seminar we invited more than 13 teachers from Govt. primary school of North East Karnataka and I was there throughout with them translating the deliberations and making them comfortable. In the night we used to take forward the discussion about topics triggered from the day's presentation.

I should say that my involvement in the school SDMC has definitely helped me understand the dynamics of the teacher –parent relationship and work on it.

It is a love hate relationship: The teacher parent relationship has a love hate tint to it. There is some sort of mistrust amongst these two groups. I see the same thread passing through my village school, CFL and the schools I work with in CFSI (Child Friendly School Initiative) Surpur as a block. In my village school it was very raw and straight between the teachers and the parents, in CFL it is highly sophisticated and subtle, in Surpur block it appears like the tension between two sections of society - illiterate poor and literate powerful. I feel that for the village poor the school had always been an outside entity coming in the way of their worked out routine and livelihood. That is why the

poor parents cannot own the school and participate in its activities whole heartedly. This mistrust cannot be erased by one or two meetings. This mistrust can be softened only by consciously and consistently working for it. And working together for a common cause or a greater cause is the only fool proof approach. I have experienced some success in my village. The Melas in Surpur school tried to bring together these two groups very successfully on a large scale where both the groups focused on showcasing the learning of the child and the school. For me the loop was completed when we had a Science and Math Mela in my village school involving 4 neighboring schools.

Teachers don't want you to tell them how to teach:

This, I found in all these three units. Teachers feel that this is their territory. They need to concentrate and do their job everything else in this connection is a nuisance. This is one area where I have seen nothing happening in my village school, CFL and the Surpur block.

Planning together leads to working together: Hence, the major block is at the planning level. This was one area where we could not do much in my village school. We organized planning exercise in the month of June every year and consistently the teachers would foil it. This was successfully done by them in spite of Vani being the president of the SDMC. This is one more area where we have failed completely as a village SDMC. To make this really a meaningful process will need an organized effort with the buy in of both the department officials and the parent leaders.

Collective leadership is crucial: Not just representatives but the collective leadership is the most crucial element in the success of these bodies. Today the SDMC in my village

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is quite active. They whole heartedly supported the Science and Math Mela this year. They want to continue conducting the children workshop in the vacations. This is possible because there is a critical mass which demands it. In the initial days we spent a lot of time with individual parents on why they should participate in the school activities. Later organizing a variety of activities ranging from programs for farmers to health and personality development gave a lot of scope for different people to participate in these activities and thus in their own development process. This has created leadership qualities in many people and leaders.

It is a long haul: From my experience of more than 25 years in my village school it is very clear that there is no quick fix solution. Like any other development work it needs time sustained engagement. There have always been ups and downs. We have not been able to build a school of our dream. We are still working on it.

No politics please! This whole thing of neutrality is something that I do not understand. It is politics. Politics of the literate and rich. That is why this whole attempt of empowering the SDMC has such a lot of opposition, rejection and reluctance. Hence, capacity building of people for this role is very important. They should be empowered to raise their voice and demand what they want. Hence, working with the SDMC is with a political agenda- to empower the powerless – the politics of the poor.

Respecting each other is the key: We found that this was the key factor. We learnt it with a lot of causalities. In the process we lost many friends, made a few enemies. But eventually the work in the school taught us that respecting people with whom you work or deal with is central to any movement. I feel that this is the basis of any democratic process. Once people are willing to listen, consider others opinion, respect and value them a whole new value fabric gets constructed. Once this fabric of values is in place, team/group work becomes easier, meaningful and productive.

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