The headmaster is the leader of his or her school, but also part of a larger 'system', which comprises an institutional structure, a set of management practices, theories and practices about the nature of learning, approaches and specific strategies for equity. The overall goals of the system, and consequently of a government school headmaster, are embedded in the Constitution, the legal framework and government policies. These, however, have to be interpreted against the social context in which the school is situated. The extent to which these goals can be fulfilled depend on the characteristics of 'the system' i.e., institutional structure and capacity, political and administrative ethos, assumptions about the child and learning, management and pedagogic practices.

The headmaster, as the leader of the school, may be expected to set and achieve goals for the school in collaboration with his/her colleagues, parents and students. However, as a headmaster within a larger school system, his/ her goals and the capacity to achieve them are shaped by the larger system and its characteristics. We shall examine here the influence that the system exerts on the headmaster.

The System And The Headmaster's Goals

The Indian Constitution envisages a right to education for all children between the ages of six to fourteen years, and also envisages the promotion of equity. The Right to Education Act (RTE) and the National Policy of Education 1992 detail out this right: providing for certain basic minimum number of teachers and facilities, a structure for ensuring the quality of education, strategies for ensuring equity etc.

The aims articulated in the Constitution, legal and policy frameworks derive their meaning in our specific social context. The traditional inequities in our society based on caste, gender and land ownership, are complemented by more contemporary inequities of wealth in a phase of high economic growth. Economic growth can be a great opportunity for redistribution, as it is easier to distribute growth than existing assets, and an ever larger number of people can reap the fruits of prosperity. Equal opportunity for education for all can be a key driver for such redistribution.

Yet, recent studies show that the school education story is promoting more inequity in India. There is a well documented separation of schools based on socioeconomic status, with better off children attending private schools and the less well off, girls, Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe children, working children etc attending government schools, while the really poor and deprived, do not even complete the mandated eight years of schooling (Nambissan 2005, Ramachandran 2003).

In this context, the two important concerns from the policy perspective are: *ensuring that all children complete at least eight years of school, and maintaining quality in government schools.* If all children attend school, and government schools provide high quality education, then all and not just some children will fulfill their potential, and the current trend of differential educational opportunities for children based on their socio-economic status will be undercut. The Constitution, RTE and our policies very clearly support the creation of inclusive and high quality government schools. In this sense, our laws and policies throw up a challenge for the headmaster, i.e. to lead his or her school to excellence, and provide a space for creative and meaningful leadership.

Achieving Goals In The Systemic Context

Let us now ask a more difficult question. To what extent does the system enable and assist the headmaster in achieving these goals for his or her school?

Leaders, who are part of large systems, as are government school headmasters, exercise their leadership in a given 'systemic' context. This type of leadership is different from the kind exercised by the headmaster of a private school.

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The private school headmaster has to basically satisfy parents, students and the school board or management, though he or she too has to follow some government norms such as curricula, examinations etc., and is likely to have a fair degree of autonomy. The government school master on the other hand, has to satisfy a larger system and work within its practices, rules and regulations and exercises partial leadership. But the government school headmaster can also benefit from the resources that large systems can develop, such as well planned training programmes, shared knowledge resources, learning from peers etc. vis-à-vis the private school teacher. The government school headmaster has a disadvantage in terms of autonomy, but advantage in terms of access to intellectual and other resources.

I argue, however, that at the present juncture, the system undercuts even the partial leadership of school headmaster, while inadequately compensating with greater intellectual and other resources.

The leadership role of the headmaster is constrained by hierarchy, centralizations and rigidity. The school system is extremely hierarchical and the school is placed at the bottom of this hierarchy (Sharma 2009). Such a system may be appropriate for an army, but has little relevance for an educational institution. It is also highly centralized. Teachers are posted to the school or posted out by higher authorities, the curriculum and textbooks are prescribed and teachers are often trained without much concern about the needs and convenience of the school. The school is seen largely as 'receiver of orders', whether these be about the time table, celebrating events, collecting information, etc. The system is rigid, so that rules have to be applied whether or not they are relevant. So pervasive is the hierarchy, rigidity and centralization, that many headmasters choose to be followers of orders even where they do have autonomy.

This constrains the headmaster's initiative and the ability to devise context specific solutions. As headmasters function on the basis of a series of top-down instructions, they have little room to address the specific needs of the students, or innovate. This leaves little room for excellence. Moreover, the school becomes an alien institution, serving the commands of some distant officials rather following a plan embedded within the needs of the community. In such a scenario, the headmaster may not be able to draw support from the community and may in fact, face considerable hostility.

The advantage of intellectual and other resources that a larger system can provide are not really available to the headmaster, as the Indian system has not developed its resource institutions adequately. Our State Councils for Educational Research and Training (SCERTs) and District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs) have yet to become vibrant producers and sharers of knowledge. The quality of teacher training programmes is highly variable. There is very little meaningful discourse on education and the nature of learning within the system (Dewan 2009). Consequently, the headmaster gains little in terms of real academic support from the system. He or she may have to follow a host of academic 'orders', but these do not enable better teaching and learning in the school.

Along with a lack of intellectual vibrancy, the headmaster also deals with the culture of patronage and corruption that pervades the system and impacts education deeply. Teachers' postings are an important way in which the whole system is reoriented towards the interests of the powerful rather than towards fulfilling the goals stated in the Constitution (Sharma 2009). In most States, teachers' postings are patronage based. The better connected teachers can get 'good' postings, i.e. in urban schools, while the less powerful are posted in poorly connected villages. This instills a sense of unfairness among teachers and de-motivates them. Other unethical practices such as teacher absenteeism emerge , as teachers may 'tie up' with their supervisors to overlook their absence. Favoured teachers may be 'attached' to more convenient and urban schools, so that headmasters

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in poorly connected rural schools have to deal with teacher shortages and absence. The prevalence of patronage based functioning and corruption creates an atmosphere where individual interests are placed over institutional goals, and therefore erodes the integrity of institutions.

Finally, the system offers few rewards to individuals who remain committed in spite of the context in which they function. We have no way of recognizing and honouring really good teachers and headmasters. Not only are such individuals not recognized in the formal sense of promotions and the like, but may go totally unnoticed, so that the pursuit of excellence remains a lonely journey without even the occasional compensation of recognition and appreciation that motivates all human beings.

Summing Up

The above discussion indicates that important shifts are required within the system, if the headmaster is to be supported as the leader of an intellectually vibrant school sensitive to the needs of the community. Our Constitution, laws and policies spell out clearly the need for high quality and inclusive government schools. But to enable the headmaster to achieve this, the system needs to shift from the hierarchical, 'order giving' role to a more supportive one, in which a school may define its goals in its particular context, giving greater autonomy to the headmaster. This must however, be matched with rich academic support and management practices that motivate teachers and employees. Reform within the system is key if headmasters are to realize the potential of their schools.

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