

Turning around a Government School -

The Case of Dhulagori Adarsha Vidyalaya

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Published by:
Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Contemporary Studies, New Delhi

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Introduction

More than two-third Indians live in rural areas, where education is primarily imparted through government schools. Many experts have opined that growth and human capital development go hand in hand. Significantly these relate to health and education because a nation needs at the very minimum a healthy and educated workforce for economic development. Economist and Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen who has done significant work in this area says that unless the country gets its act together and significantly improves the health and education indicators, the country will not prosper. He has drawn on the data and experiences of Japan, Korea and China among others to show the necessity of making significant investments in health and education, and also argues for a shift from literacy to education.

The conceptual flaws that guided nation builders in formulating and implementing primary education in India just after independence continue with the Right to Education Act, 2009. While the government is focusing on universal education, the quality of primary education is found to be declining. According to ASER 2018 Report, it is now well recognized that learning levels are low and that they are not changing much as years go by, and in fact for a few years there were distinct declining patterns. It also carries a quote, “if a learning profile is flat, schooling only measures ‘time served’ and not ‘skills gained’”. Thus, only 27.2% Standard III students can read Standard II text, and only 20.9% can do 2-digit numerical subtraction. Equally alarming, only 50.3% students of Standard V can read Standard II text, with 72.1% not able to do 3-digit by 1-digit numerical division problem. By Standard VIII, the last year of compulsory schooling in India, children are expected not only to have mastered foundational skills but to have proceeded well beyond the basic stage. Yet, 27% cannot read Std. II text, and 56% cannot do 3-digit by 1-digit numerical division problem.

Amidst this gloom, there are significant success stories. These experiences do not relate to elite private schools but to initiatives by voluntary sector working among the poorest sections of society, and operating in equally trying conditions. Vidya and Child and Parivaar are but two outstanding examples. But such schools are in a microscopic minority, considering that overwhelming number of schools in rural areas are government schools. For example, in rural West Bengal, about 88% of children in age group 6-16 are enrolled in government schools. In other words, it is in the government schools that greater attention and humongous efforts need to be directed to improve the learning outcomes of school going children.

But turning around a government school is an altogether different and daunting task. Being part of a large crumbling system, it is not just a question of moving a leviathan. Where institutionalized corruption, lack of accountability and political jockeying breed a culture of non-performance, any serious effort by an occasional well-meaning headmaster is likely to meet its proverbial end. Where states have a hoarier history, it doesn't take much imagination to envision the range and degree of challenges involved. For example, according to ASER 2018 Report while enrollment for the age group 6 to 14 has been above 96% every year since 2010, attendance pattern in primary sections of government schools varies across states. So, while Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu had attendance of 85% and more, states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh and Manipur had below 60% attendance.

It is in this context that we will narrate the turnaround of Dhulagori Adarsha Vidyalaya, a government school in rural west Bengal.

The Protagonist

In late September 2014, Debasish Mandal, then 44 years old, joined Dhulagori Adarsha Vidyalaya as Head Master. Apart from a Masters in zoology and Bachelor degree in Education, Mandal also had formal training in computer application in education. He was also a state resource person in life skill education, ICT education, state text book writer and content designer. Among other things, he had developed modules regarding stress and conflict management to prevent corporal punishment in schools, and wrote activity based integrated books for the school-going children of West Bengal. But it was his use of ICT materials and tools – especially teaching young kids to use handheld cameras to make short under-ten minute films in DVD format on environmental and social issues that was to come handy to implement activity based learning and develop social sensitivity and life skills among the children of Dhulagori Adarsha Vidyalaya (DAV).

Before he joined DAV, Mandal had more than a decade long stint at the almost 200-year old The Oriental Seminary in the heart of Kolkata where he honed his skills in the above areas. His students from the Seminary went on to make short clips connecting the text book with their own environment and these short movies were shown in Kolkata International Film Festival from 2010 to 2013. For Mandal, this was living proof of the superiority of process based learning over content based text book learning, adding: “not read and memorize knowledge; rather create. Then it can be internalized, integrated.” He went on to state that his use of ICT in education during his years at the Seminary was a good way to achieve Tagore’s dictum: “Even if a child learns a little, he must also learn to apply it. Then only he will be able to use the knowledge at will. Otherwise, it will only be load on his brain.”

But Mandal reckoned that if he wanted to scale up and reach out to a larger audience, it would be helpful to don the cap of a headmaster than just an ordinary teacher. Mandal recalled that two other related issues kept recurring to him. First, while children from poor, semi-literate families find it difficult to master the 3Rs due to lack of conducive environment, the hardships they face make them quite observant and inventive; so, could he tweak his activity based learning pedagogies towards observation and discovery to serve as effective learning tools? Second, “more than challenge, greater opportunity lay in trying out these ideas in a school considered ‘hopeless’ or ‘gone case’. And even if I am moderately successful, it will be helpful for so many similar schools”.

In due course Mandal acquired the requisite experience and cleared the selection test of Headmaster.

Background of Dhulagori Adarsha Vidyalaya

The school is located in Howrah district of West Bengal and is approximately thirty five kilometers from the outskirts of state capital, Kolkata. It is tucked away in the middle of a village,

and to approach it, one has to travel through narrow winding roads, so narrow that two small vehicles coming from different directions would have to maneuver a lot to let one vehicle gingerly make way with great difficulty. It was started by Sudarshan Burman, a Dhulagori village resident, in his house on 2nd January 1964 and got its first recognition up to class 6 on 1/10/64. Then it got recognition up to class 8 on 4/1/68. Soon thereafter, village residents Laxman Sarkar and his brothers allotted 8 katha¹ land for the school and the school shifted in 1968 from Burman's house to Laxman Sarkar's land. But it was only after fourteen years in 1982 that the school got recognition up to class 10 from state education department. Thirty two years later, in 2014, the government agreed to fully fund the school². With this, the government also sponsored a (revised) management committee³ from 2/12/2014. In 2018, the school got recognition up to class 12. At the start of academic session in 2019, the school had 938 students, with girl enrolment higher than those of boys (see Exhibit 1).

Run-in with Management Committee: When Mandal went to take charge of DAV on 26th September 2014, the government sponsored (revised) management committee was yet to be set up. So it was the Secretary of the then prevailing Managing Committee (MC) who told Mandal that Dhulagori was not a vacation spot and there was no need for him to join. But Mandal did turn up and in spite of vigorous protest from the Secretary and his supporters, signed the joining register. Mandal was soon to discover the reasons for the belligerent resistance of the (then) Secretary and his supporters. It had to do with swindling of money linked with the government's mid-day meal programme. At DAV, corruption in mid-day meal administration was manifested in the following ways.

Since the release of funds is tied with the number of students availing the mid-day meal scheme, the first corrupt practice was to inflate the number of students on the rolls of the school. This included the inclusion of fictitious names as well retention of names of students who had already dropped out. The second corrupt practice was to populate the administration of mid-day meal scheme with a support group who would draw sustenance from corrupt practices. This was quiet easy to achieve. Since the number of cooks appointed is in ratio of the number of students availing the mid-day meal⁴, more number of cooks were appointed. Naturally, from the livelihood point of view, these cooks owed their allegiance to the corrupt governance system that appointed them. This was best manifested in the appointment of the wife of the Secretary of Management Committee. First, to accommodate her, one of the serving cooks had to go: so, "trumped up charges of negligence and insubordination were levelled against her, and she was made to go". Next, when the Secretary's wife was appointed, her seniority was pegged higher than those who had joined the school earlier. And if these appointments were also colored by party allegiance, the corruption bond became that much stronger.

As Bimal Kumar Naskar, currently an Advisory Committee⁵ member but who was not associated with the then MC, observed: "Evidently, the number padding of students and the direct siphoning of money through corruption in mid-day meal scheme wasn't possible without the active collusion

¹ "katha" equals 760 square feet.

² Prior to that, it was in the category of "government aided" school which meant that while it got funds (fully or partly) from the government, the management lay in private hands. In contrast, a government sponsored school is completely owned and controlled by the government. The government is in charge of the curriculum, study materials, fee structure, syllabus, examinations, etc.

³ First, the local MLA nominates the president and two person interested in education. Once this is approved by the State Education Department, West Bengal, the President then selects two guardian members and three teachers and one non-teaching staff is also included in the managing committee. The headmaster according to the rule is the secretary of the managing committee. The committee also comprises of one block medical officer and S.I. of schools. Thus the total number of members is 12.

⁴ For the first 100 students, there's provision to appoint 2 cooks. Thereafter, every additional student attracts 1 cook. Therefore, 200 students means 3 cooks; 300 students would entail 4 cooks.

⁵ The Advisory Committee was a separate body formed by the Headmaster to advise as well assist him on co-curricular and developmental issues of the community in which DAV was located.

of good number of teachers aided by the silence of others. But a simple rule of transaction is that when an unfair advantage is granted, an equally unfair advantage will be sought. So, corruption in mid-day meal scheme spawned teacher absenteeism and late coming as a quid pro quo.”

If the number of students partaking the mid-day meal is actually less than what's projected, then what happens to the extra ration? But what if the extra ration is not bought in the first place but still billed? Since cash transactions were the norm, it was easy to produce inflated bills.

Resistance from entrenched and powerful people

Since the starting point of the scam lay in projecting inflated number of students, the first clean-up act was to prepare afresh class-wise register of students. Mandal said he was lucky in one way. Two months after he joined as Headmaster, the government had nominated a revised MC; so Mandal was hopeful of not encountering opposition from the new MC members, at least on this account. Actually, he was on very good terms with Ashis Pandey, President of the revised MC that the government had set up in early December 2014, barely a few months after Mandal had joined DAV.

As a matter of due course, the updated list was shared with the Block Development officer (BDO) because the sanction of the number of cooks to be appointed in proportion to enrolled students is given by the office of the BDO. Based on new information, in May 2015, the BDO ordered proportionate reduction in the number of cooks based on the principle of “last-in, first-out”. Scrutiny of appointment register showed that while the wife of the Secretary of the (then) MC was the last to be appointed as the cook, she was moved up the seniority list. This deliberate anomaly was rectified by asking her to quit by invoking the principle of “last in, first out”. Next, budgetary allocation for procuring ration for mid-day meal would also reduce. Monthly bill was to plummet from upward of Rs. 80,000 to Rs. 25-30,000 a month!

Since the action of the BDO was an outcome of the information relayed by the headmaster, the latter was subjected to “hooliganism by the goons” of earlier MC members who were beneficiaries of the mid-day meal scam. Matters came to a head when in the first week of August 2015, Mandal was asked to attend a meeting in the office of the Panchayat Pradhan.

In an interview, Ashis Pandey recounted what had happened before and after the above event:

“Although I belong to this village, I’m ashamed to say that before Head Sir (meaning, Debashish Mandal) joined, our school was considered amongst the worst in the state. You cannot imagine the corruption. The school was like a corruption factory. The school did not have a headmaster for many years. It was run by MC members, actually the (then) Secretary and his henchmen. Whether it was swindling money through mid-day meal scheme or in construction, it was big time loot. No records, no nothing. That’s why the earlier MC didn’t want Debashish Mandal or, for that matter anybody, to join as Headmaster. But Head Sir already had some reputation in government school system in West Bengal. He was considered dynamic and thorough, especially with records. Naturally, he was seen as a threat.

“When he joined, the revised MC wasn’t formed, and we were not involved. But the village is small. So we all knew what was happening. He was subjected to dire threats. There was also “bombazi”⁶. After the revised MC was formed and I was nominated the MC President, we told Head Sir, we are with you. This was our chance to set the school right. But you think the goons would accept things lying down especially after he turned off the tap of corruption in mid-day meal?”

“So, after the meeting at Panchayat office, the brother of a Panchayat nominee had told Head Sir to consider what would happen to him if a rape case by a dalit woman was registered against him. Considering that no bail is granted in such an eventuality, Head Sir wrote out a resignation letter and sent it to me. In the resignation letter, Head Sir said he was genuinely scared of the threat of rape case; and since he couldn’t risk not just his reputation and the honour of his family but also his source of livelihood, it was best for him to resign and leave Dhulagori. Then he promptly proceeded to Bikash Bhawan in Kolkata which housed the headquarters of state education department.

“At that time, I didn’t know that Head Sir hadn’t come on lien, so if his resignation was accepted he would be jobless. But to us what mattered was that we couldn’t let him down at this critical juncture. Besides, if he left, the school would be doomed for good because no other headmaster would dare join Dhulagori again. So I and some MC members spoke to as many villagers as we could. Since the villagers had seen distinct improvements in the school in which their wards studied, they rallied around. In no time about four-five thousand people collected and created real “halla”, and tempers ran high. The old MC members hid themselves or ran away. The police came to pacify the villagers but it’s difficult to manage four-five thousand people who are so agitated. They just wanted Head Sir to return then and there. Somehow, we got in touch with Head Sir in Kolkata and requested him to return immediately and pacify the villagers...”

Mandal immediately rushed back and spoke with the crowd who were mostly from the village where DAV was located. As Mandal was to later say, he was both surprised and overwhelmed by the mass support and wondered to what extent his process based teaching and projects like ‘Living Memory’ which involved the parents, uncles and grandparents in teaching pedagogy had played a role in showing solidarity for him.

Change of Strategy

Mandal acknowledged that teachers would be so insulting that he dared not enter the common room for teachers (known as Teachers’ Room). Mandal’s counter strategy was to ramp up stakeholder support from the ranks of students’ families. He reckoned that the one thousand students of his school represented roughly the same number of families. And if there were five members to a family, his support base would be close to five thousand. Engaging with so many

⁶ Almost everything is politicized in West Bengal, and politics and political violence are coterminous in West Bengal. It is quite common to hurl crude bombs both to intimidate as well cause bodily harm to opponents. “Bombazi” serves as an adverb to describe the practice of hurling such bombs.

families and building a potentially powerful coalition was a draining process, and Mandal says that he had to consciously draw upon the lessons he had learnt on stress management to retain his mental equipoise. Mandal was also to acknowledge that while the semi-literate villagers may not have been in a position to perform any “guiding” function, but in the highly politicized environment of rural Bengal, a strong coalition provided him with lot of moral strength to do what he wanted to do.

Identifying small but critical intervention areas

When history teacher Aparna Chatterjee had joined the school in 2012 she found not just the building in a dilapidated condition but there was filth all over. It was also characterized by indiscipline: “It wasn’t just that children were running around helter-skelter, but they’d come and go as they pleased. The same went for staff and teachers... Many students wouldn’t turn up for days and teacher absenteeism was normal and accepted.” Did she also indulge in absenteeism? “No, but I would sometimes come late which would still be early by acceptable standards.” She went on to explain that the whole environment was so negative that one didn’t feel like working. Added Bimal Kumar Naskar, the Advisory Committee member: “Many teachers of this school felt so ashamed and their self-esteem was so low that they would not acknowledge in public that they worked here.”



Obviously, DAV was not unique in the above respects as successive Annual Survey of Education Reports (ASER) released by NGO Pratham had depicted such scenario prevalent in many government schools especially in rural areas across many states (see Exhibit 2).

Three things stood out for immediate action: cleanliness, student discipline, and teacher attendance. The state of cleanliness or rather the lack of it was best manifested in the state of the headmaster’s room. Since there was no headmaster at DAV for a long time, the headmaster’s room was as dirty as one could imagine, with cockroaches and rats as long-term residents. The

drive for cleanliness was designed more as a first step in the chain of activities leading to a change in operating culture.

The second was to instil a sense of discipline among the students. This too was conveyed as an urgent need, a need on which teachers could have no argument and, at least on the face of it, had to go along with the headmaster. There was another advantage: the target group was not unionized workers or teachers but young students, many of them not even in their early teens. While Mandal was to later encourage the students to question things that they took for granted, he resorted to regimentation, starting with morning assembly, marching to respective classes, and staying put in classes. But even in this he could count on the active support of only a few relatively younger teachers.

Since student behaviour in school is mediated to some extent by parents, the headmaster systematically engaged with the parents: to “inform, influence and seek support”. In turn, many parents were grateful to the headmaster for making their wards give up freaky hairstyles and return to “normal” grooming.

Addressing teacher absenteeism was tougher. As a matter of strategy, this problem was addressed after some success had been achieved on issues of cleanliness and student indiscipline, providing the socio-psychological space to take on a tougher issue of teacher absenteeism. Kaushik Sarkar, a Class 10 student offered another perspective. For him, the change was in teacher engagement: “now things are different; teachers take interest in us, teach and explain.”

Sports and physical education was another aspect that Mandal wanted to emphasize, but he was handicapped by the lack of space in school premises. But close by, there was a community centre and a park that provided enough space for sports and physical activities. With two dedicated Physical Education (PE) teachers, DAV incorporated PE period in the school’s time table in a staggered manner so that all school children would have sufficient scope for such activities. Firoza Mallick, a Class 11 student who has been with DAV for six years said that while at present she has had to restrict her sports activities due to health reasons, she really thought she could compete at state level given the scope and encouragement she received in the past few years.

Moving on to Substantive Changes

First, DAV moved from cash payments for ration purchases – which was a source of much corruption – to online payment to vendor, aided by data-based accounting in Excel. This reduced monthly expenditure from the range of Rs. 80,000–82,000 to Rs. 25,000–30,000. Second, a new building has been added with requisite facilities like separate toilet for girls, drinking water, library, two dedicated audio visual (AV) rooms and one Creative Green room. With these improvements, DAV is now in an enviable position compared with schools in rural Bengal (see Exhibit 3). To avoid any financial irregularity, the choice of architect and contractor was done through e-tendering, with DAV management retaining the privilege to determine design changes in the building.



Third, the school has been upgraded to higher secondary level. Fourth, the plague of teacher absenteeism has been ended. Fifth, board results show a distinct improvement (see Exhibit 4). And all these have been achieved in a space of about five years.

Student engagement and new forms of learning

But for Mandal, while the above gains were substantial, these did not touch the real problems plaguing the educational system – which spawned a vast army of “educated” but unemployable youth, with virtually no life skills. Especially vulnerable were kids of semi-literate parents and from impoverished families. It was doubly important for them to acquire skills and innovative capacities likely to give them the wherewithal and confidence to deal with uncertainties of life. Mandal’s “real concern” was to “improve the confidence and skill levels of (his) wards”; that was the “primary reason for him to don the role of Headmaster”. Two approaches were tried at DAV. The first was to build empathy and relational skills. The belief was that, irrespective of whatever knowledge a student may acquire in school and thereafter, success depended on social interaction skills. Therefore, DAV initiated activities and programmes involving group interaction.

Since the school did not have adequate open ground, some of activities had to be organized in a nearby community centre and a park. The open spaces were also regularly used for games and sports activities.

Next, Mandal reckoned that while a conducive environment went some way in energizing people to perform, these by themselves were insufficient to achieve substantive changes in teaching pedagogy to attain the vision of improving the learning capacity of students through knowledge application. This called for a shift in emphasis from content based learning to process based learning. He was particular to highlight a portion of National Curriculum Framework – 2005:

“[I]ntelligent guessing must be encouraged as a valid pedagogic tool. Quite often children have an idea arising from their everyday experiences or because of their exposure to media, but they are not quite ready to articulate it in ways that a teacher might appreciate it. It is in this ‘zone’ between what you know and what you almost know that new knowledge is constructed. Such knowledge often takes the form of skills, which are cultivated outside the school, at home or in the community. All such forms of knowledge must be respected.”

However, compared with costly English-medium schools, government schools - especially in rural areas - rarely build the knowledge, skills and capacities of their students to interact with the outside world with self-esteem and on an equal footing. DAV therefore embarked on a series of programs and activities that would help the students – and as Tagore had envisaged – to learn to apply whatever knowledge they gained. For example, a photography workshop organized with the help of Sandip Sarkar, a Kolkata based professional, helped students learn to take photographs of many flora and fauna and these were exhibited in Emami Chiseled Art Gallery.

Apart from the primacy of inculcating social skills that couldn't be taught through text books, Mandal emphasized there are serious limitations in acquiring knowledge from text books. Instead, there was a need to look at nature as a “guru”, as source of learning. Accordingly, DAV students had to go the “field”, observe and identify environmental related issues, figure out mitigation methods, and capture the story in charts, posters or ten-minute videos. Some students would be taught how to handle a camera and make short films on nature and environment. The two dedicated AV rooms and Creative Green room were regularly used by students from Class 5-10 for these purposes. Mandal used his laptop to enhance the audio-visual effects of his teaching sessions. Mandal was categorical in his assessment that it was precisely this focus on learning from natural surroundings that DAV students have always won 1st prize in inter-school competition on environmental issues against such prestigious schools as La Martiniere, Kolkata.

Inspired by the “Hole-in-the-Wall” program⁷, he placed a harmonium unobtrusively in one of the rooms where kids could go on their own time, play with the harmonium and quickly learn to play the instrument. Today, it is these kids who play the music during morning prayers after daily assembly. “Provide them with some facility, some trigger points, and let them be. They'll build on it, they'll innovate”, gushes Mandal and points out that after a lecture-demonstration on Kathak, sixty five DAV girls learnt to dance on their own.

Then there was a treasure hunt programme in the name of ‘Living Memory’ where students had to find out old artefacts at home and bring out the story behind that artefact by talking with their

⁷ On January 26, 1999, in collaboration with the Delhi government, a team led by Dr Sugata Mitra, then Chief Scientist at NIIT, carved open a section of a wall adjoining the NIIT campus, and placed a computer there. This was used by children, without supervision, from the adjacent slum — quite literally, “A Hole in the Wall”, was born. The next year, a similar set of computers was installed in Dakshinpuri in South Delhi. The success of the project has been such that it has become the inspiration for an internationally acclaimed movie, and 14 years after the project took off, Dr Mitra has been awarded \$1 million grant by non-profit organisation TED, to take his innovation forward.

parents and grandparents. While the artefacts brought to school would go to create a museum, engaging with parents and grandparents to elicit the story behind created a connectedness of guardians with the school. Parents could also see how their wards were learning.

Another innovation was organizing a Tie and Dye Workshop which was billed as an entrepreneurship programme for rural children. This was a three-day workshop in collaboration with Mahadevi Birla World Academy where both teachers and students of DAV were trained in embroidery. Another initiative was tying up with local representative body Balurghat Panchayat Samity and civil society organizations Ahead Initiative and Spur to conduct a Srijan Fair in a rural area of Dakshin Dinajpur on the basis of colorful textbooks introduced at DAV.

Participation in interschool events and competitions	
Year	Event & Award
2013-16	Interschool pollution control competition: 1st Prize in consecutive years on “Managing Plastic pollution in Dhulagori”
2015	Earth reel interschool competition on Water Scarcity in Kolkata Presented documentary on water scarcity in Dhulagori.
2015	Interschool block level youth parliament competition Secured 2nd prize
2016	Earth reel interschool competition on Bio-Diversity in Kolkata 1st Prize for news capsule regarding protection of bio-diversity in Dhulagori
2016	Interschool District Quiz Competition 2nd Prize in Howrah District
2017	Earth reel interschool competition on “Protecting Biodiversity” in Kolkata Secured 1st Prize by defeating renowned schools like La Martiniere of Kolkata about pond protection in Dhulagori
2017	Kala Utsav 2nd Prize for showcasing Zari work of local people
2017 & 2018	“Clean and Green Environment Award” from the Howrah district officials of the West Bengal government
2019	Earth reel interschool competition on “Conservation of Species” in Kolkata 1st Prize for showcasing “Threat to Bengal monitor lizard and effective solutions”
	Gopal Chandra Barman who was a part of these projects is now a wildlife photographer, sponsored by Nikon

Dhulagori Adarsha Vidyalaya in Competitions & Award Ceremony



Award for making film on "In search of Lost Pond"

Psychosocial Change

Initially, the Green Room was used “to go beyond the chalk and talk method of teaching and learning” by connecting the learners with their immediate natural environment. It was a place where the students were self-teaching themselves to learn singing, dancing and recitation, including the use of You Tube. But Mandal was soon to rechristen the Green Room to `ADDA GHAR’⁸, where students were given socially relevant topics to discuss and enhance their knowledge and also develop their analytical and creative thinking skills. Issues ranged from combating religious bigotry and intolerance, promoting inter-faith collaboration, and prevention of drug abuse, child marriage and abuse of internet. Mandal refers to both Atharva Veda and the Preamble to the constitution of UNESCO that “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed” and then goes on to say that it was necessary to sensitize today’s school going children to these issues: “catch them young, shape their minds, for they are our future”. It doesn’t stop at discussion and debate in the `ADDA GHAR’: “at the school level, the next step in the psychosocial circuit is to organize events and activities. So, the children enact street plays, and students from the minority community made the `alpana’⁹ during Saraswati Puja. The school also hosted a theatre workshop on violence against women”.

Programmes and Activities to Build Interactional and Social Skills



⁸ While social gossip is part of most cultures, the Bengali word `Adda' virtually represents a core element of its culture by its ubiquitousness - ranging from plain gossip to serious discourse.

⁹ Traditional Bengali rangoli is a painting done on auspicious occasions by hand on the floor. It is usually white in colour as it is mainly a paste of rice and flour.

Challenges

Mandal acknowledges there are however some real challenges in implementing process based learning, especially involving ICT. First, most teachers are not familiar with, much less trained in, teaching pedagogies that go beyond rote learning. This unfamiliarity makes the teachers discourage experimentation with application based learning. Second is the absence of technical and financial support to promote this type of learning. So far, cost of producing videos has been nil with Mandal providing his personal camera and doing the editing. Transport costs for students attending functions and competitions at other schools have been within Rs. 1000 with board and lodging in any case free. Yet, there are other costs. Some funds come from annual tuition fee of Rs. 240 per child, payable by willing students; those who plead they can't pay being exempted. But these have been found to be a strain. Mandal has so far managed to anchor the projects with the help of "some empathetic colleagues and friends". One of his Facebook friends donated a steel almirah, another donated Rs. 29,000. Cash donations are deposited in General Fund, and donors are issued not only receipts but expenditure and utility details.

But not all students manage to shine; as data in Exhibit 3 suggest there's a large number of students who are neither in the loop of process based learning, competitions and awards, nor do they do well in studies. Mandal despairs but provides what he calls the "washing machine analogy":

"Almost all our students come from poor families; some so poor that they hardly eke out a decent living. With survival the main challenge, how can parents of such kids provide even the minimum learning support or environment? We do all we can during school hours, but after these kids get back to their sorry environment, all learning goes through the window. So, our struggle to teach them anew continues. That's why I call it the "washing machine" syndrome. Wash clothes, wear them, they get dirty; wash again. The cycle goes on".

So far, it has been Mandal who has been strategizing, anchoring and implementing the changes. While individual teachers like Aparna Chatterjee are eloquent in their praise for their headmaster, one notices the absence of a group with shared commitment and enough power to continue with the change process. Even before joining DAV, over many years Mandal had taken the initiative to learn new tools and techniques. His younger colleagues at DAV lack such knowledge, skills and experience. While Mandal acknowledges the necessity of leadership development and succession plans consistent with the new approach, his response when asked what's likely to happen if he were to leave suddenly is: "People say, things will cease after your departure." Jasimuddin Mondal, newly appointed MC member, had similar opinion.

But, Bimal Kumar Naskar, Advisory Committee member for over five years, appears sanguine. While acknowledging that DAV had become "a factory for making money" before Mandal came on the scene, things have now changed, adding "Mandal has engaged all the villagers to participate, saying 'after all I'll go and you'll remain'. So in case the headmaster leaves (prematurely), we have to call a meeting of society and ensure the good work continues."

Exhibit 1: Enrolment data

Year	Boys	Girls	Total
2010	616	663	1279
2011	619	709	1328
2012	589	625	1214
2013	540	599	1149
2014	502	613	1115
2015	484	565	1049
2016	409	499	903
2017	355	465	820
2018	384	496	880
2019	405	533	938

Exhibit 2: ASER 2018 National Findings

Learning Levels: Foundational Skills		
Standard	Reading	Arithmetic
III	Only 27.2% students can read Std II text 72.8% students cannot read Std II text	Only 20.9% can do 2-digit numerical subtraction 79.1% cannot do 2-digit numerical subtraction
V	50.3% students can read Std II text 49.7% students cannot read Std II text	72.2% cannot do 3-digit by 1-digit numerical division problem
VIII	By Std VIII, the last year of compulsory schooling in India, children are expected not only to have mastered foundational skills but to have proceeded well beyond the basic stage. Yet, 27% cannot read Std. II text	Even by Std VIII, 56% cannot do 3-digit by 1-digit numerical division problem

Learning Levels: "Beyond Basics" (for 14-16 age group)

- 77% can read Std II text

- 50% boys and 44% girls can correctly solve a division problem

Of the 14-16 year olds who could solve a numerical division problem:

- less than 50% could compute the time question correctly;
- 52% could apply the unitary method to calculate how many tablets were needed to purify a given volume of water
- 37% were able to take correct decision regarding the purchase of books
- less than 30% could compute the discount correctly
- In all cases, fewer girls could solve questions correctly as compared to boys

Further, performance on these everyday tasks was uniformly lower among those in this age group who could do subtraction but not division, as compared to those who could do division

Exhibit 3: ASER 2018 - West Bengal Rural: Trends over time

All schools (Std I-IV/V; Std I-VII/VIII)	2010	2014	2016	2018
Table 15: Student & Teacher Attendance on day of visit				
% of Enrolled children present (average)	68.5	58.5	60.1	54.9
% of Teachers present (average)	85.6	80.3	82.9	76.7
Table 16: Multigrade Classes on day of visit				
% of Schools where Std II children were observed sitting with one or more other classes	42.4	47.1	43.8	46.0
% of Schools where Std IV children were observed sitting with one or more other classes	33.6	36.3	44.0	38.8
Table 17: % of Schools with Select Facilities on day of visit				
Mid-Day Meal	63.4	66.7	67.4	81.6
Drinking Water Available	67.2	78.4	78.4	81.3
Toilet – usable	52.1	70.8	76.9	81.1
Girls’ toilet: separate, unlocked, usable	23.7	46.9	63.0	67.7
Library books being used by children	31.8	43.6	46.2	38.4
Electricity – available	-	-	89.3	91.0
Computer: not used by children	0.8	0.4	2.9	5.5
Computer: used by children	0.5	1.5	1.1	1.2
Physical Education period in Time Table				62.7
No Physical Education period but dedicated time				22.4
PT Teacher: Separate PE Teacher				2.8
PT Teacher: Other PE Teacher				70.9
Playground: inside school premises				52.9
Availability of any sports Equipment				54.3

Exhibit 4: Board Results

Class X Exam					Class XII Exam
Year	Total candidate	Lowest marks (%)	Average	Highest marks (%)	First batch will appear in 2020
2010	113	15.7	33%	76	
2011	110	16.7	36%	77	
2012	104	16.3	37%	73	
2013	79	17	32%	78	
2014	86	17.3	30%	82	
2015	159	15	42%	90	
2016	137	18.9	43%	89	
2017	123	15.4	40%	82	
2018	103	18.6	44%	83	
2019	110	18.9	45%	85	



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