



1982 : A typical schoolday at Kendriya Vidyalaya (KV). The day begins with just the same last minute scuffle for signing the attendance register and collecting class registers. You stand by and watch while the teachers hurry on to class and then to the assembly. Somebody side tracks you with an application for leave. The Activities In Charge gives you input on the day's events. Assembly over; talk to latecomers, observe classes, teach, attend to parents, office matters, planning for functions, exams, parent teacher meetings. There were days when life was peaceful - and schools, happy places. Principal and teachers collaborated in capacity building measures for the school, self and students. School improvement was the joint responsibility of the staff. What was the role of the Principal? Not beyond being a manager.

Admission rules were prescribed, broad guidelines of curricular and co curricular practices were given, administrative and financial practices were outlined with restraints in place. Within these confines the Principal was the deciding authority, the true 'head of the family'. The head took decisions regarding classroom practices, co-curricular practices. The school climate, the school culture, innovation in class room practices, theories of learning, counseling and career development of students and staff - all these were dealt with, at school level. Accountability of the school head was measured by results in Class X and XII as well as by financial practices. But the real measure was by the students and parents. There was very little monitoring and very little interference. There was more autonomy then. But was there more accountability?

15 years later : A revolution. Imperceptibly and slowly, change crept into class room practices and the school

climate. More expectations, more monitoring, more workshops, more training, more letters, more replies. Principals became information dispensing machines. Admission rules were tightened. Information regarding the infrastructure, admission, retention, gender, religion, caste-based data, evaluation, assessment had to be sent regularly. The computer revolution changed the way information was sought and given. Now we had to send things by email, fax them and repeat them over telephone. This Tech Monster was slowly engulfing the school. Time was a casualty. Principals no longer looked into the class room. They could - with difficulty - maintain contact with the students and staff on a daily basis.

The KVS was clear about one area of work which was autonomously handled i.e. classroom practices. Principals were always directors of training courses. They whetted their hands at these courses by being the first ones to orient themselves.

2002 : School appearance becomes important. The centre loosens its purse strings. Administrative decisions were taken at the central level and this sent a huge windfall into the Principal's lap. Money became easily commissioned and dreams began to come true. Immediately, Principals spruced up the lobby, bought carpets and sofas for their rooms did them up in style! Class rooms began to look bright and airy. We could give contractual appointment for labour and provide for infrastructure. Autonomy in infrastructural changes - with easy sanction of funds - brought with it its own set of problems: more financial procedures - more financial accountability!

KENDRIYA VIDYALAYA Diu: The Meaning Of Autonomy : Lessons Learnt The Hard Way.

There is a small school in a place called Diu - a tiny little island tucked away in the armpit of Gujarat. This is a laid back tourist place with only a collectorate, fisherfolk, indigenous Anglo Indian population with Portuguese as well as Indian passports and an airstrip managed by the Indian air force. The KV, which is midway between Diu and the airport, is

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in a village called Fudam; with 300+ students in Classes 1 to 10. The KV was run in 5 rooms borrowed from the Government High School, Fudam, which had 4 to 5 rooms in which 2 Government schools ran in shifts. These rooms were ethnic looking huts (from outside) with the plaster peeling off the walls that were themselves falling to pieces. Two classes were held in one room and one in the office. The sea would come flooding in on rainy days and no drinking water was available. Yet my class ten first batch did me proud. The Government school and the Kendriya Vidyalaya which shared rooms, also shared the local management.

There was a staff problem in the Kendriya Vidyalaya at Diu. One of the reasons was that the village Fudam - where the school was situated - did not permit outsiders to stay there. Fudam was a village where only housewives stayed, the husbands were away most of the year on ships. An unwritten diktat ruled that no house would be rented out. Hence, teachers were compelled to stay far away. Despite several attempts to engage in dialogue with the community elders, there was no success in securing accommodation for teachers and hence, a staff shortage. With ad hoc staff who had no training; quality education was a far off dream. The teacher who arrived to school on a battered cycle lived miles away from his family, and simply counted days before his transfer. Textbooks were not available. If I had autonomy, would I have been able to find a viable solution to this problem? Could I have decided to shift the school to a different location? How did my lack of autonomy interfere with the solutions that we as the school team found, to this problem? We worked together to help those who wished to move closer to their families with their transfers. Those who stayed on, rallied together; school timings were tweaked

a little. Teachers took over the financial matters and book keeping tasks. No other teacher was unnecessarily troubled to stay back after school. Matters like 'Post', 'denomination' simply dissolved. A primary teacher who had a good understanding of mathematics taught the newly minted batch of Class X. There was no Principal's office. I was sitting with Class IX and working while I was surrounded by them.

In Diu lack of autonomy created problems. I did not have rooms, water, toilets, furniture, staff and I had financial restrictions. The will was there. The BEO built two rooms for my school through SSA funds in record time!! I enlisted the help of my husband and got a local carpenter to repair all the old benches for a song. I permitted all my new staff to stay in the school premises till they found accommodation. An old unused toilet was cleaned and repaired. A Class X parent provided a tanker whenever we had water shortage. And the ocean always obliged us with company which we had to clean up after. Staff allocation was done in an innovative way using the services of the staff wives who helped out with the clerical work on almost honorary basis. Being with their husbands made them feel safe. It also helped them do their practicums for D Ed.



If I had autonomy I would have perhaps given longer and comfortable stays to new recruits in the few hotels nearby, till they found suitable quarters. Perhaps, too, I would have had the school building and staff quarters on first preference immediately without any delay, instead of the back and forth that I was doing with the Delhi office, collectorate and local administration. Less autonomy here meant more time and effort spent in writing entreaties, visiting offices and authorities to sort out problems. But answers did turn up

and land was eventually sanctioned for the KV.

Parental Expectations And Autonomy:

The Principal is never a part of the visioning or policy-making process. These are made in ivory towers and translated to reality in the grassroots. It is the Principal who inherits the ideology that she translates into practice. Today, we talk about quality education. But parents think of this only in terms of marks and grades. They want their children to be competitive. When CBSE decided to do away with marks for the primary section and adopted grades, there was stiff opposition from parents. Even today, when there is a plethora of alternate and lucrative careers, parents want their children to take up science and become engineers and doctors. Changing mindsets is thus a very slow and painful process. When CBSE abolished the Class X board exams, one of our staff members lamented, 'You know, my son will just not study.' Yes, your son will not rote learn, but can't he go on a voyage of discovery and learn what he is interested in? Parents want tangible measurement, as they will only then be convinced that you are teaching something and that their children are learning. The fear regarding continuous and comprehensive evaluation is that it is 'subjective' and, therefore, 'biased'. What kind of autonomy do parental aspirations, community constraints, political ambience and geographical conditions leave to the Head of the school? Should the Head of the school have autonomy to go beyond or against parental aspirations?

If we are to cater to far flung areas, in the midst of political upheavals with community constraints, the Head has to seamlessly align autonomy and vision with these conditions. Schools in Kerala and Kathmandu do not only share a 'K',

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they also share a feature of having to close them down due to Maoist (Communist) 'bandhs'. It is often difficult to close down a school when the safety of children is a prime concern. The children are safer in the school than out on the roads. When will schools be spared political shenanigans and become autonomous entities?!

In 2007, the American Institutes of Research and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute released a report titled "The Autonomy Gap," which argued that principals, who shoulder much of the burden of accountability systems, typically lack the authority that they need to really improve student performance, especially when it comes to school staffing.

Autonomy In Private Schools

Many heads of government schools like Kendriya Vidyalayas, State Board schools, Navodaya Vidyalayas would bemoan the lack of autonomy in hiring and firing staff. This is a matter of concern for a Head, as the effort required to turn around the attitudes or abilities of staff members would take precious time away from bringing quality into academics and translating the vision of the school into reality.

But, in some private schools where Heads do have this autonomy, they face challenges due to a high attrition rate - till the schools are on a sound financial footing and can afford to pay competitive salaries. They are accountable to the parents - who pay heavy fees to educate their children. They must offer them a good menu : scholastics, sports, activities and an assurance of later admission to prestigious colleges at home and abroad. They must become product minting machines churning out high achievers, great sportspersons and multifaceted supermen. The Principals of such schools are often under tremendous pressure; tossed between the management and parents. No wonder then, they feel that their autonomy is seriously threatened by the Right to Education charter! How will they ensure quality if their student intake is 'diluted' by the have-nots?? They have valid reasons for their opposition and are not thinking about autonomy but about the interests of the children under their care. They are also worried about the skill set required by the teacher to create the readiness and inclusive atmosphere, in the class, to handle this heterogeneity of baffling dimensions. Lack of clarity in RTE provisions regarding procedures for admissions of disadvantaged students, ground level challenges like handling differences in competency levels, creating assessment criteria which are

Board compliant and within the range of student ability, plus huge teething problems envisaged in the initiation of the process suddenly find Principals in unenviable positions.

"A field study in Assam reveals that the role perception of Head Teachers at all levels of school education is confined to a general view of performing certain duties required of them by virtue of powers delegated to them by the Education Department. These duties are: (a) administrative, i.e., daily administration of the school covering all activities and administrative aspects of running an institution; (b) financial, i.e., maintenance of school accounts and cashbook; collection of funds; disbursement of salary to the staff, etc. and (c) academic, i.e., classroom teaching and supervision of school staff. This view needs to be broadened through a

systematic and sustained effort by education authorities in order to help the head teachers go beyond the fine tuning of what currently exists and implement school development programmes more effectively."

We seriously need to create an inclusive process through which Head Teachers are part of the Policy think tanks. The visioning and planning of schools need to be done with practicing Principals/ Head Teachers on board. They are the ones who direct the vision through the alleyways of grassroots experience. Coercing change will produce reactions like the kind of stiff opposition to RTE provisions by Private School Principals. Acknowledging the challenges faced by Head Teachers and preparing them for change is only the first step.

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