

Dead Hand of Obscurantism

A 30-year old programme much lauded for its contribution to popularising science learning among school students is now embroiled in the same sort of controversy as has marked efforts to revise school social science curricula in recent months. The episode in Congress-ruled Madhya Pradesh has also served to underscore how narrow, conservative attitudes cut across political party lines. The Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme (HSTP) devised by Eklavya, an NGO working in primary education in Madhya Pradesh from way back in 1972, is now threatened with closure as state politicians, across the political spectrum, have taken objection to it.

Their ire has been directed at Eklavya's history textbooks. Eklavya has pioneered the effort to make social science learning more meaningful and interesting for children. It attempted to go beyond 'describing' history, geography and civics and used stories and case studies to bring children closer to experiencing the life and circumstances of people inhabiting other places and times. In another departure from mainstream educational practices, Eklavya also adopted the open-book examination system permitting students to refer to their books which, it was thought, would develop their referencing and information-processing skills.

The present controversy is very akin to that surrounding central HRD minister M M Joshi's move some months back to delete portions from school history textbooks deemed to be hurtful to Hindu religious sentiment. Eklavya's textbooks face the same charges on what they contain such matters as vedic sacrifices and food habits of ancient Indians. Eklavya has maintained that it follows the state curriculum and its textbooks are scrutinised by the government. It has also represented that there is ample historical evidence to support the statements on vedic sacrifices, meat-eating and conversions. Eklavya's innovative attempts to develop an alternative curriculum framework have been informed by the latest research on the learning process and the subject area.

It is most unfortunate that the controversy has targeted the HSTP. Eklavya began its innovative experiments in making science learning fun and yet useful in 16 schools in the Hoshangabad district of MP. Till the early 1970s there had been little effort to develop an alternative model of teaching or curriculum design. Schools in rural areas were caught in the double bind of poor educational standards and widespread student and teacher disinterest in science, the result primarily of the dry course content and the way the subject was taught in the classroom. HSTP now covers about 500 middle schools of Hoshangabad and Harda and some 1,00,000 students. Proposals are on to initiate HSTP in 13 other districts of central Madhya Pradesh. HSTP did away with learning by rote and introduced more 'student-friendly' curricula and teaching methods. Teachers were prepared for their new role as facilitators and guides through teacher reorientation programmes. To encourage children to ask questions, Eklavya's science workbooks feature a fictional character named 'Sawaliram'.

Children share their experiences and send him their questions.

Similarly, in Eklavya's Primary Education Programme (PEP) teachers are encouraged to value the importance of hearing and speaking Hindi in interesting contexts as a base for reading and writing. PEP began in seven tribal and rural schools of Betul and Harda districts in 1987 and now covers all the 128 schools of Shahpur, a predominantly tribal block. The experience of PEP contributed to the design of a formal school programme called 'Seekhna Sikhana', developed under the aegis of the Madhya Pradesh State Council of Education, Research and Training, with Eklavya's active collaboration. This programme now covers almost 80,000 primary schools in the state.

Eklavya's role in popularising science among children extends beyond HSTP. It is part of several people's science groups that conduct public campaigns on environmental and developmental issues. Formally registered a year before the Bhopal gas disaster, Eklavya commissioned independent scientists to monitor Bhopal's fields, gardens and water supplies for MIC breakdown products and published a 'people's report' on public health concerns in the city. Through poster exhibitions, songs, street plays, etc, that move from one village to another, Eklavya creates awareness on issues such as the scientific explanation of so-called 'miracles', people's health and medicine, watershed management, the Narmada dam controversy, etc. It brings out a monthly children's science magazine, a weekly news feature service that supplies newspapers with articles on science-society issues as well as a teachers' magazine focused on the needs of elementary school teachers, particularly in science teaching.

According to Census 2001, the literacy rate in Madhya Pradesh rose to 64.1 per cent from 44.2 per cent a decade ago, an ascent that is largely attributed to the efforts of NGOs to promote primary education. Even more impressively, the female literacy rate went up to 50.3 per cent from just 28 per cent in 1991. Eklavya's innovative curricula, teaching methodologies and educational materials have made it a role model for many NGOs in Madhya Pradesh and elsewhere in the country. It would be a great pity if obscurantist politics were to be allowed to undermine an all-too-rare success story in primary education. **EPW**

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