

In the labyrinth of the education bureaucracy

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IN matters related to elementary education, more than in any other field, the Indian state's metacapital is unquestionable. That is, the state not only has access to real capital but also deploys and reinforces its power through the symbolic, cultural and social capital that it has built up. In this the state not only permits the functioning of elementary education institutions, but is also its most dominant owner and manages and supervises the multiple functions associated with it: it selects teachers and administrators, designs curricula and syllabi, constitutes textbook committees, produces and distributes the texts, sets the school schedule including exams, regulates teachers and their awards, punishments and transfers, and executes a range of programmes and schemes. To perform all these and more, the state's apparatus is not merely large and bureaucratic but a labyrinth reflecting the larger culture from which its personnel are drawn, in turn reproducing a culture that makes the adequate functioning of its agents problematic.

The plethora of education related institutions from the block level to the state (the secretariat, Commissioner's office, textbook division, midday meal division, Council for Education Research and Training, District Institute for Education and Training, Deputy Director of Instruction's office, Block Education offices and the offices for new programmes such as DPEP and now the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan) are all part of this labyrinth and the personnel participate and strategise in ways that are particular and peculiar to it.

Although central to the functioning of the education system, this bureaucracy has largely remained unstudied and the ways in which it thwarts, distorts and even destroys programmes and policies to address education related problems have been overlooked. Understanding its culture and impact on the education system, may highlight the key reasons why even well-thought out and designed programmes peter out to have no impact and why despite nearly a decade of programmes to improve elementary education we see minimal results on the ground.

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of this labyrinth is the extent to which it is devoid of a culture of democracy and professionalism. While this may be applicable to all state departments that function as bureaucracies, the marking of some of the institutions such as the District Institute of Education and Training (DIET) and the Department for State Education Research and Training (DSERT), which are responsible for the continued training of teachers and the upgradation of academic quality/production of texts respectively by this culture, is cause for concern. The impact of such a non-democratic culture is that it is both directly and vicariously carried to the most basic unit of the system – the school.

Most decisions and planning are carried out at higher levels and are transmitted as orders to lower levels (from central government agencies to state agencies and from there

to district and block levels), without the contribution and inputs of various sections and levels. This vertical production and transfer of decisions and programmes is replicated at every level with concomitant loss of meaning and orientation. Little wonder that decisions and hence programmes and policies are seen and internalized as just another set of orders in relation to which they, as education administrators, have nothing at stake.

As most agents are enveloped in a condition of ataraxia, of 'not being troubled',¹ they become indifferent to programmes and work. Such a condition helps explain why bureaucrats at different levels are insufficiently engaged with programmes, and why so many remain callous and disinterested in their work and the execution of programmes.

The non-democratic culture also fosters a culture of overt submission and covert sabotage. Enveloped in a culture of 'sir' and 'madam' in which status and hierarchy consciousness is deep and visible, many agents ensure that their own position vis-à-vis higher ups is not jeopardized. Adding to this is a patrimonial structure and orientation which inculcates among its members a culture of supplication and servitude. Gifts, services and favours flow from the lower rungs to those in positions of power and decision making in an attempt to gain their recognition. The jostling for position alone accounts for the deep factionalism among members of the department.

Camps and dissent form around and between those favoured and disfavoured by the head and most activities become subject to scrutiny, not for their content and orientation but as to the source of decisions. On the one hand, authority (even undemocratic authority) is never directly questioned. On the other, authority, especially if represented by an unpopular person, is contested and challenged through vicarious and indirect ways. In such contexts, unpopular heads are challenged not directly but through ensuring that work and its quality suffer. Far from delinking work from the persona of the head, the two are intermingled to be jointly resisted and thwarted.

As a result, the link between work and the agent is contradictory: at one level what requires personal commitment and dedication is met with indifference and carelessness; obversely, what must be undertaken in an impartial and impersonal way is subject to personal readings and interpretations and is sabotaged. Under such conditions, how can an education department with a mandate requiring its personnel to be proactive, creative and independent in executing programmes be realized? No wonder that programmes which hinge on the participation and contribution of personnel, such as that of teaching and conducting the Diploma in Education (pre-service teacher training) and the continuous in-service teacher training, do not have inputs that are updated, relevant and interesting.

As a result of this non-democratic culture and the ataraxia that afflicts them, most members succumb to a condition of routinisation. Far from being creative, most programmes become subject to a process where agents receive a particular package designed elsewhere by higher authorities which they replicate, often in a watered down and distorted version. Such routinisation constitutes the work culture norm within these

departments and is associated with a mindless performance of tasks without an ability or interest to assess work in terms of quality, relevance and impact. Perhaps the most visible impact of this process of routinisation is a lack of sensitivity and engagement that foredooms many programmes to failure.

Programmes that particularly require deep involvement and commitment from members of the department are victims of such attitudes. New programmes or schemes that call for decentralized and context specific measures also meet a similar fate. This largely explains why the DPEP, designed to be a decentralized, district specific programme, largely failed to address local and district specific problems.

Expecting education personnel to know the details of how many children are out of school and why, allowing for local holidays, or integrating local knowledge etc. are all issues which go beyond the orientation of teachers and administrators to cater to local needs. An inability to do so is manifested in even the data that is supposed to be gathered. For example, the mandate is to have regular data on schools and the various programmes. In practice, data sheets are filled without a responsibility for veracity and collated without verification and cross-checking such that the end result is often contradictory data that is also outdated by the time it is printed! Such examples abound: instructions to identify school dropouts have seen half-hearted effort and data remains questionable; programmes to re-enrol and support out of school children see less than a quarter of eligible children in school; instructions to supervise teachers and academic inputs are rarely carried out.

More than the thwarting of programmes, the agents themselves become ‘unconscious’ victims of routinisation. Their inadequate skills and training go unnoticed and they seek no measures or inputs to improve. No surprise that programmes to ‘professionalise’ or upgrade the knowledge and skills of department members have rarely met with any success. A singular but persistent problem with such a state of routinisation is the extent to which the bureaucrats seek to lay blame on the system rather than be reflexive about the possibilities of providing their own suggestions for improvement or of their own inadequate skills to meet the demands of work. Constantly reiterating administrative demands over academic responsibilities is one way in which work is either stalled or unperformed. This was emphatically brought home to us when members of a district education bureaucracy in Karnataka were asked to write a ‘vision statement’ of their work and responsibilities. After much thought the respondents’ visions turned out to be one of getting facilities such as a television, telephone and so on for their work!

The undemocratic and ataraxic culture of the bureaucracy both draws upon and reproduces the larger culture from which the agents and members are drawn. Few instances are more explicit about this than the entrenched caste bias among members of the education department. While the ability and capacity of children from low-ranked caste and tribes is always suspect, the new government programmes that enforce the provision of special aid to them have led many to mark these children as the ‘government’s children’ and to treat them with contempt and insensitivity. In addition, such a culture which reifies and reproduces hierarchy and status makes the undemocratic

culture within the bureaucracy legitimate and acceptable. Further, the actors and agents play out their internalized norms of inclusion and exclusion, forming groups in terms of gender, caste, community and religious differences, and reproducing stereotypical notions of each other.

Marked by these characteristics, education bureaucrats are often in a double bind. At one level there exists an undemocratic culture that constitutes the 'administrative rationality',² which leads to the loss of agency and to ataraxia. At another level, the socially derived biases and orientation reinforce their isolation and lack of reflexivity. A result is that bureaucrats have become like school students playing truant, defying the rules that bind them in ways that only further disadvantage them. Such actions and attitudes include the failure to update themselves on new ideas and practices, an indifference to new programmes and a closure to innovation and creativity. In many ways, this closure is part of a self-preservation strategy which seems to be the only option in the context of the lack of a larger democratic ethos.

Given such conditions and characteristics of the education bureaucracy, it is pertinent that we understand why the plethora of programmes that have been continually developed and deployed, especially since the mid-1990s and the advent of the World Bank's DPEP, and the financial backing they received, have not been that successful. Placing these programmes within the context of the functioning of the education bureaucracy itself may tell us more about the need to reform the bureaucracy before fresh tasks of implementing new and innovative programmes are assigned to them.

Bombarding the education bureaucracy with programmes and schemes to address problems of education has been self-defeating. Until the bureaucracy itself is reoriented to its functions and responsibilities, it will largely be unable and unwilling to implement the programmes and schemes in their spirit and intent. A bureaucracy that is out of sync with the ideas it must disseminate and engage with will only make null and void the purpose and impact of new programmes.

Footnotes:

1. Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason*, Routledge, London, 1998.

2. Anna Yateman, *Bureaucrats, Technocrats and Femocrats*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1990.