

Schools without a difference

Navodaya Vidyalayas exemplify a government initiative that has lost its purpose



KRISHNA KUMAR

BOARDING SCHOOLS ARE part of India's modern history. When the central government launched the Navodaya Vidyalayas (NVs) in the mid-1980s, they were presented as a major innovation in social policy in that they were intended to serve rural children. In many ways, they did constitute a bold, new step. Three decades on, the NV innovation has fully merged into the mainstream, coping with its familiar problems rather than exemplifying an alternative. The recent reports in this newspaper ('Suicides in Navodaya schools', Navodayas struggle with student suicides'; IE, December 24 , 25, 2018) about suicides in NVs demonstrate that they no longer exemplify the search for an alternative.

Although the NV plan was part of the National Policy on Education (1986), its idea preceded the policy. Rajiv Gandhi had mentioned it in his first address to the nation as prime minister. His desire to set up a residential school in every district was apparently inspired by his own experience as a child at Doon School. Many people expected that NVs will emulate Doon's example of high academic standards along with space for creative exploration.

Enrolment to NV's Grade 6 was based on an entrance test, with 80 per cent reservation for children belonging to villages located in a district. Not everyone was convinced that enrolment through a selection test was a good idea. NCERT conveyed its doubts about the reliability and validity of a selection procedure dependent on a test among 11-year olds. The government went ahead and started setting up NVs across the country. Each school was allotted sizeable land in the countryside. Generous funding and impressive infrastructure, including on-campus housing for teachers and not just children, distinguished NVs from other state-run residential schools, such as the boarding schools in tribal areas.

NVs were promoted as "pace-setting" schools, implying that they would serve as a model for other schools in the district. How could they? Their facilities and funds were way ahead and they were not governed by the state directorate. The contrast was also sharp in teachers' emoluments. Like an oasis, each NV attracted relatively better-informed rural parents. Soon after the scheme was launched, coaching centres sprang up in every district to help children succeed in the NV enrolment test.

From the central government's perspective, NVs offered a congenial institutional ethos where policies could be showcased. The implementation of the three-language formula in NVs included exchanging the entire Grade 9 cohort across linguistic regions for the entire session. It was a great idea and it generally worked quite well.

After a few years of inception, the NVs faced a big dilemma. Should they serve as models of child-centred education in rural areas or prepare village children for national-level contests for seats in prestigious institutions of medicine and engineering? A decade ago, the pressure to follow the latter route began to increase within the bureaucracy. Proposals to provide coaching to the senior secondary level students were mooted. NGOs like Dakshana were given permission to select children with the best potential and coach them. Grilling the selected round the year without break bore fruit, exacerbating the familiar stress of exams on children and teachers. The Dakshana website proudly claims that "more than the 1,400 of Dakshana scholars, till 2017, have cracked the JEE Advanced to



Suvajit Dey

secure admissions into IITs". It is hard to explain to the users of this discourse that there may be more to life than cracking the JEE.

From the beginning, NVs had emulated the urban public school model. There was little concern to develop a new vision for rural children. Instead, the dominant ideology prevailing among administrators and teachers was that they should work for the standard routes towards upward mobility. Differentiated futures had no takers. I recall the case of a child who was passionate about playing the flute. When he was found away from his classes, playing the flute in a nearby forest, the NV administration did not know what to do with such a child. Ultimately, he had to leave. Success in examinations, that too with high marks, had dogged the NV experiment from the beginning. Like their counterpart, the Kendriya Vidyalayas, NVs dared not ignore the mainstream trends of India's education. Principals and teachers were supposed to dedicate themselves to pushing all the children to work hard for marks.

The Indian Express investigation into suicides in NVs comes as no surprise. The one-size-fits-all template of secondary education in India has exacerbated the pressures that adolescents routinely face and feel, leading many to feel lonely, depressive and suicidal. Suicides before and after higher secondary exams are reported every year across India. Coaching institutions have also joined this trend. In the NV case, nearly half of the reported 49 cases over the last five years are

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from marginalised groups. As usual, the administration places the blame on teachers who are themselves overburdened. The absence of trained counsellors adds to the problem. The NV administration has asked teachers to notice symptoms of depression among students. Such steps might offer some help, but they will not mitigate the larger tragedy of a scheme that forgot its mission and took the beaten track.

The NV story reminds us how inimical the systemic ethos is to any genuine innovation. Most schools justify putting children under pressure by referring to parental pressures. This argument, facetious as it is, does not account for suicides at NVs. Their original mandate had little to do with competitive success. They were expected to provide a humanistic alternative to the moribund, bureaucratised culture of common government schools. Financially secure, NVs could have posed a challenge. NVs had the potential to present a creative alternative to the mindlessly competitive atmosphere of English-medium urban public schools. As it turns out, NVs surrendered to the hegemonic culture of the latter. Regimentation of the child's body and mind, and driving everyone towards a single goal — that of getting ahead of others — became their guiding principles. The bureaucracy that runs them had little imagination or vision to define their pace-setting role in an original, creative manner.

The writer is former director, NCERT

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

“The lowest growth rate does not indicate that China's economy is facing a crisis. Instead it's a process of resolving tough problems, controlling serious risks and finally realising a soft landing.” — **GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA**

A quiet courage

As PM, Manmohan Singh upheld a tradition of openness to ideas and disagreements. This is an inheritance India needs to cherish and advance



ECONOMIC GRAFFITI

BY KAUSHIK BASU

THE RECENT PUBLICATION by Oxford University Press of five volumes of writings and speeches by Manmohan Singh, and the release of the film, *The Accidental Prime Minister*, takes my mind back to a conversation, nearly eight years ago, with the accidental prime minister.

On March 11, 2011, I posted an idea on the Ministry of Finance website on controlling one class of corruption — harassment bribery. This refers to cases where a person has to pay a bribe to get something she is entitled to, such as, when after passing a driving test, she is asked to give cash before she is given the licence, or, after paying all taxes, a small businessman is harassed by the tax collector into paying a bribe.

It struck me that one reason harassment bribes were rampant in India was the fact that the Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988 holds both the giver and the taker of bribe equally liable for punishment. This meant that the bribe giver would typically not admit in court to having given a bribe, and this created the comfort zone that encouraged government officials to ask for bribes with alacrity. Amend the law by making bribe-giving legal while heaping the punishment on the bribe-taker, and the incidence of bribery would go down.

That was the idea which got me excited; and, being quite new to government, I wrote it up, and posted it on the ministry's website. Furore broke out of a kind I had never experienced. There were newspaper articles attacking the proposal. There would be supportive articles in some newspapers and magazines, and also some endorsement from a few thinking corporate leaders, but those came later.

On Saturday evening, April 23, just as I thought the controversy was dying down, I got a call from Barkha Dutt, inviting me to appear on her then television show, 'We the People', where, she told me, I could explain my idea and then there would be a discussion, which in Indian television jargon means a screaming match.

I was in a dilemma. In my short time in government, I had discovered that I was comfortable with and even enjoyed participating in these policy "debates". However, I knew I had caused the government a lot of grief with the posting of my proposal. A few days earlier, D Raja, the Communist Party Member of Parliament (for whom I have a lot of respect) had written to the prime minister, with a vitriolic complaint about my "immoral" idea. I had half expected to be asked by the finance minister, Pranab Mukherjee, or the prime minister to take the paper down from the website. To their

credit, they made no such request. Hesitating whether I should stir the pot again, I decided to do what I rarely did: Ask their advice on whether or not I should appear on Barkha's show.

Mukherjee was away in Vietnam. So I called the prime minister's residence and left a message. Ten minutes later, he called back. This was the first time I was talking to him about my bribery paper, though we had exchanged notes and messages as the controversy brewed.

He quickly got to the point. He had received complaints about my idea and had read the newspaper reports, though he had not read my original paper. He went on to add that he did not agree with me. I tried to defend my idea by suggesting that he was probably misled by the secondary sources. But he was adamant; he disagreed with my proposal. I kept quiet, expecting him to say I should stay off the debate and let the idea die a natural death.

What he said next caught me by surprise. He said that, though he disagreed with my idea and it had caused him political difficulty, that did not mean I should not speak about it. The role of an adviser is to bring ideas to the table, even if they are controversial. So I should feel free to appear on TV and explain my idea. The decision, he said, was mine.

This was a remarkable instance of quiet courage. His courage was not that of the schoolyard bully that some people mistakenly think of as courage, not realising that it takes no courage to silence contrarian voices from a bully pulpit. It is much harder to allow the flourishing of ideas, even ones that contradict yours. Allowing diversity in ideas and people, having universities where students discuss and float new ideas, is what makes a nation strong, and gave India the global stature it has.

From this and several other experiences during my years in government, it became clear that Manmohan Singh, contrary to what his understated style often seemed to suggest, was a person of immense courage, backed up with clear thinking. This is what enabled him to put new ideas on the table in 1991, marking a turning point for India's economy. This helped create an ethos in which bureaucrats and experts felt included, resulting in well-crafted policies that put India on the global stage.

Some months later, at a G-20 meeting, I recounted this story. There was quick agreement that only in advanced nations are there leaders like this, who have the courage to allow ideas they disagree with to be discussed and disseminated. India stood out as the world's outstanding exception because of the imagination and audacity of Nehru's endorsement of free speech. Several Indian leaders, including Atal Bihari Vajpayee, upheld this tradition, but it can be easily eroded. This is an inheritance we need to cherish and advance: The right to free speech by citizens, a critical media, the flourishing of science and literature and, what is at the root of it all, a quiet courage.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

DEAR POPE FRANCIS

IT IS WITH much expectation in your robust sense of justice that I address this letter concerning the harassment to which four sisters of the Missionaries of Jesus order in Kerala are being subjected, for their solidarity with a fellow nun who has had to go through harrowing experiences at the hands of a bishop by the name of Franco Mulakkal.

In a measure that reeks of vindictiveness, the Mother Superior of the order has issued transfer orders to the four sisters which are, prima facie, punitive in nature.

The fact that the Roman Catholic Church in India did not respond pro-actively in the matter of the sexual exploitation of a nun has already caused extensive damage to the image of the church in India. Now, to make matters worse, certain functionaries of the church are compounding tolerance towards heinous crimes with intolerance towards commitment to justice. Surely, this cannot be in accordance with the teachings of Christ.

I urge you because of my personal faith in your bold and unapologetic commitment to justice for the oppressed, to intervene in this matter and to defend the sisters from being harassed.

Swami Agnivesh, New Delhi

OLD WOUNDS

THIS REFERS TO the article 'On Assam, clearing the air' (IE, January 24). The JPC on the bill had asked the Assam government to settle the illegal immigrants. But when there is pressure on fertile land, what incenses me is the audacity of the party and the author to ser-

LETTER OF THE WEEK AWARD

To encourage quality reader intervention, The Indian Express offers the Letter of the Week award. The letter adjudged the best for the week is published every Saturday. Letters may be e-mailed to editpage@expressindia.com or sent to The Indian Express, B-1/B, Sector 10, Noida-UP 201301. Letter writers should mention their postal address and phone number.

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monise. The greater Assamese identity has never been solely about religion or language. But the BJP, with this bill, has changed all of that. Assam is burning and will continue to burn with the re-entrenchment of these faultlines.

Trishanu Borah, New Delhi

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

THIS REFERS TO the editorial 'Another Gandhi' (IE, January 24). Priyanka Gandhi Vadra has no magic wand to change the dynamic of UP election in this short span. It is unlikely an individual's charisma may save a sinking ship.

Chanchal Nandy, West Burdwan

THE Urdu PRESS

BILL OF WORRIES

THE ISSUE OF granting citizenship to just non-Muslims from the region, on coming into India, has led to many editorials and comments. An unusual one is a two-part editorial on the Bill in *Munsif*. On January 11 and 12, the broadsheet held forth in detail. On January 11, it wrote: "At one level, terming Indians foreigners and saying they should be thrown out of India, and on the other, by law, giving outsiders Indian citizenship, only the BJP is capable of this hypocrisy." The paper said that "India's system and its secular rooh or soul" is under attack. The BJP is doing this for supposed political benefits in Assam and West Bengal, but it will instead just set the place on fire.

On January 12, the paper wrote: "As Home Minister Rajnath Singh has said that the refugee burden will not be borne by just Assam, but the entire country, one must ask him, what about the already present Rohingya refugees in the country...? Why do you want to send them out?" The paper goes on to castigate party leaders for saying the NRC is good as the burden of 40 lakh cannot be borne, as "India is not a dharamshalaa. Then why are you making India into a dharamshala?" The paper concludes that the

Bill would be "political suicide for the BJP, which has ambitions in 21 of the Northeast's 25 Lok Sabha seats."

Siasat on January 10 started its editorial with the line, "In India now, anything can happen." It wrote that the current government is engaged fully to implement its aims. The party pushing the Citizenship Bill in Parliament is pushing through its policies of discriminating between citizens. "It would be a sad day if this Bill is passed. This is a blatant refusal to give Muslims citizenship," the editorial argued.

This act, is about "making the BJP's discriminatory policies towards a section of Indians internally, so evident, by etching them into law." The Modi government is only engaged in vote-bank politics to secure its share in power. This needs to be opposed by all sections of society. "Earlier, the BJP was already notorious for discrimination. It is now giving legal form to its vision of discrimination."

MAKING OF ALLIANCES

THE AIMIM-mouthpiece *Etemaad* on January 22 wrote that the "SP-BSP unity is burning up the BJP (chiragh paa). The BJP has set the CBI on Akhilesh Yadav and its leaders are now busy making insulting statements

about Mayawati. Uttar Pradesh is India's biggest state and to get to Delhi, UP is essential." The paper believes that the BJP is surprised that such long-term rivals, SP and BSP, have got together in UP and now political activity is very hectic.

Munsif on January 14 quotes the well-known aphorism that there are "no permanent friends or enemies" in politics and expresses delight that in her "joint press conference with Akhikesh, Mayawati termed Modi-Shah, Guru-Chela, and is out to defeat them." She is also quoted in the editorial for saying that "as in the Pulpur and Gorukhpur byelections, we are the only force that can get together and defeat the BJP."

Inquilab on successive days, on January 21 entitled 'Quest for the post of PM' and then on January 22, in different editions, entitled 'Secular Ittehad aur BJP ki ghabraahat' and 'Janshakti aur Dhanshakti' touches on a variety of things arising from the SP-BSP alliance and the Kolkata rally of several opposition parties.

On January 21, it wrote that "the PM, his party and the media is so focussed on trying to corner the opposition, with Who-will-be-the-PM, as if that is the biggest question facing the nation on this day." It expresses surprise that the question is being raised by those consid-

Compiled by Seema Chishti