

# Rural Schooling in Wardha

A decade ago, I found myself at then Planning Commission, across Dr. Ahluwalia its Deputy Chairman and Shri Sibal, the then HRD Minister. On my right was Shri RC Bhargava of Maruti and on my left Shri Uday Kotak. How I got to be in that hot seat is another story. The meeting was about vocational training by industry, but I began by saying that we would get somewhere only if we acknowledged that Indian education was “bust”. That word raised eye brows and mirth. A decade later I can say that it has got much worse, its busted. In this piece I aim to outline the situation in school education, especially in Wardha district.

Villages seem to have fallen off our mental maps. But, currently 61% of Wardha district is rural, as would be the case in over 80% of the country’s districts. And this will and should continue. Contrary to conventional wisdom, it is Indian agriculture, especially our 5-15 acre holding farmers who are globally competitive.

A nation’s development is based primarily on the quality of its education. The better the foundation of school education the more likely the super structure will stand, else it will be flimsy, as it is now.

Since 2009 I have been responsible for 8 colleges, 6 of which are government aided, with 11,000 students. Since 2019 we run a program to improve quality in 11 Zilla Parishad schools in the district. This year we added 16 rural middle schools to this list. In 2007 we set up a Science Center for school children to enjoy science, which now forms the backbone of our efforts in education in the district.

The structure of school education in Wardha district is a Zilla Parishad primary school in each village, which is up to 5th standard or the 7<sup>th</sup> in medium sized villages. A typical school up to the 7<sup>th</sup> standard has 5 class rooms and 3-4 teachers and around a 100 students. There are 50 odd schools with less than 20 students.

Then there are aided schools from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup>, run largely by trusts of erstwhile political families. There are 200 such schools in the district.

Teacher recruitment has been frozen since 2013 in both ZP and aided middle schools. This is why the Maharashtra Government reckons there are currently 50,000 vacancies, roughly 2 per village.

Teaching is supposedly semi-english; that is Maths and Science in English and the rest in Marathi. In practice they are very much Marathi medium. At Adegaoon I met a teacher of English who was MA in Marathi! In a large number of schools there are no qualified Science Teachers.

Teachers in aided institutions are well paid, around Rs 70,000 per month, so they now stay in Taluka towns 20-25 kms away from the school. To facilitate their commute, schools start at 11 am, when they should be starting at 9.

Whoever can opt out, is opting out. The better off students from Chanki-Kopra, 27 kms away commute to Wardha. There is a middle school at Hamdapur, 8 kms away, but they give it a pass.

In every reasonable sized village with say 5,000 people, there is a “convent” or supposedly English medium school, which charges upwards of Rs 500/month. Covid has put a brake on their progress but it will resume. Teachers in these “convents” get Rs 6-10,000 per month but usually deliver better outcomes than the Rs 70,000 pm aided institution ones. But these schools are not necessarily paragons of virtue. I know of a private school in Umri, which got a primary student to enroll by paying the parents Rs 2,000 and then asking him not to attend school!

The goal of teachers is to achieve “pat sankhya” or class enrolment. A middle school school at Kharangana, 27 kms from Wardha achieves this by organizing transport from surrounding villages, but no student from Kharangana studies in it. They go to Anji 9 kms away. Another institution attributed its “development” to allowing mass copying!

In ZP schools political interference in postings is rife. At Sawali Khurd, there was a negative teacher with a drink problem. We tried to have him moved but he managed to move the Principal. As a result we dropped the school from our list.

ZP neglects its schools in its own way, the aided middle schools have largely been abandoned by their parent organisations. Teachers in these middle schools pay for missing teachers, transport to school and maintenance from their pockets. No wonder the schools are in ruins.

Despite all this, in the schools we choose to work with, 90% of the teachers want and work to improve. In every school, 10-20% of the teachers are true teachers. If for nothing, they work for ensuring that the school does not close and they do not get transferred far away.

In all this, ones heart goes out for the student. In each class there are bright faces. In the school at Vijaygopal students walk from Ralegaon 9 kms away in the hope of good education. In Sersula , a place in the middle of nowhere, 12 students have cleared the merit scholarship exam. There are a few good public schools like at Lahori, Rasulabad.

The key stake holder, the student, has no voice but is at the receiving end. Their parents too are indifferent. We tried to get parents to pay 1% of their income as “fees” for school facilities/maintenance to improve but there were no takers.

In this dire situation of poor infrastructure, poor teaching, little wonder that learning outcomes are poor. We know this, ad-nauseum, from Pratham reports. I often use arithmetical tables to benchmark learning or having a text read aloud. The results are not edifying.

The social implications of this situation are horrendous. The poor are being shut out from economic mobility through education. We grossly under estimate the centrality of hope of improvement in maintaining social peace. One of the few things we have got right since Independence is access to public education. Let us not undo it.

Improvements can be made with modest resources. At the Kamla Nehru school in Wardha, now the only government run high school in town, needed Rs 10 Lacs to fix the leaky roof, Rs 20,000 to get the rickety furniture to be stable and Rs 5 Lacs to paint the school. In their current 5<sup>th</sup> class the ratio of boys to girls is 60:40 compared to 5:95 earlier. Girls can go to any school, boys should go to good ones! In 6 months perception about the school has changed.

For the last 3 years teachers of our junior colleges have been visiting designated schools each month. Since their efforts are voluntary, all we spend is Rs 6 lacs a year on transport and Rs 4 Lacs on training, stationery etc. Also, around Rs 5-6 lacs per school, were spent one time, on maintenance & basic infrastructure, of computers, furniture etc. Between these visits wherein teaching, evaluation and training happen, running 3 day residential camps for the school children and training for teachers in Science, Maths and English we are now gaining traction in terms of student learning and teacher capability and interest. We had done this 10 years ago, at Pune with 100 low cost schools, so we know it works.

A series of decisions can significantly improve the situation. Link aided status to educational outcomes. Explore contractual employment for teachers and fill vacancies. Select teachers specifically for English, Maths and Science, and raise the educational bar to post-graduation . Increase non-salary grant to each school to 10% of salary expense. Start schools at 9 am. Stop the automatic promotion of students till class 9. Close small schools and create cluster schools instead, with government providing transport facilities. Pune ZP has already done this in Velhe taluka. As Samarth Ramdas said “kelyane hote aahe re, aadhi kelyechi pahije”. Things get done by doing, so do.